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New Madawaska fudge making business to benefit from first Maine Quality Centers project under Maine Community College System Rural Initiative

Aroostook County - A new St. John Valley company has the “sweet” designation of being the first small business in Maine to benefit from free, customized workforce training under the Maine Quality Centers since the program was expanded under the Maine Community College System Rural Initiative launched last December.

Mom’s Fudge, a family-owned business located in Madawaska, produces three flavors of gourmet fudge. The company, founded in October 2007 in the kitchen of Jane and Jerry Carter, has grown exponentially in just six months, adding to their workforce and expanding into a new production facility that houses three large fudge cookers.

To celebrate the company’s success and mark the signing of the agreement with the Maine Quality Centers, Aroostook County business and community leaders and representatives of Northern Maine Community College joined with Mom’s Fudge officials in Madawaska today to launch a new project that will assist the company in training six new employees. The workforce expansion will help the emerging business work with Pine State Trading Company to supply convenience stores throughout New England with the Madawaska-made fudge.

“We are so happy that the Maine Quality Centers and NMCC are working with us to help train our employees. It is nice to see an organization working with the people of Northern Maine so that we can bring jobs to the area,” said Mom’s Fudge co-founder Jerry Carter.

Company president and co-founder Jane Carter agrees and sees the partnership as beneficial to both the business and the local economy. “We are so glad that this program is available to us. It will help us help the area.”

The Maine Quality Centers has worked since 1994 as an economic development initiative of the Maine Community College System and has been a partner in NMCC workforce development efforts. The program provides job-specific workforce training for new and expanding businesses, and new employment and career advancement opportunities for Maine people. In all, the program has helped over 200 businesses, creating over 11,000 new jobs statewide.

Until now, the Maine Quality Centers has targeted its services to businesses adding eight or more new employees. However, the rural initiative recently undertaken by the MCCA called for an expansion of program eligibility guidelines to enable small businesses in rural Maine to participate. As a result, the project with Mom's Fudge is the first to serve rural businesses hiring fewer than eight employees.

"Of the 140,000 small businesses in Maine, 90 percent employ five or fewer workers, many of them in rural Maine," said MCCA President John Fitzsimmons. "This shift in our guidelines will mean greater access to workforce training for promising rural businesses like Mom's Fudge and more skilled employment opportunities for Maine workers in all parts of the state."

Specifically, the understanding will forge a partnership between Mom's Fudge and NMCC, under which the continuing education division of the College will develop training for company employees valued at \$12,400 in areas identified as critical to the continued growth of the small business. Six new employees will attend one or more training sessions that relate to their specific job responsibilities. These include cooking process, cutting and cooling process, packaging and labeling, first aid/CPR, ergonomics, and ServSafe training.

Joining in the signing ceremony in Madawaska was James McGowan, state director of the Maine Quality Centers.

"Maine Quality Centers is happy to partner with Northern Maine Community College and Mom's Fudge on the first project under our Rural Initiative. By making it easier to provide training to businesses whose expected growth may be less than 8 full-time positions, we hope to increase our services to rural areas throughout Maine and further strengthen our State's economy. Small, home grown businesses are too often overlooked in economic development but they make a real difference not only to our economy, but to our communities. Small projects can have big impacts and I wish "Mom" and her employees every success in this endeavor," said McGowan.

Mom's Fudge first began producing peanut butter, maple and chocolate fudge in October of 2007 and immediately began selling the product in neighborhood stores and at various Paradis' Shop n' Save stores in Aroostook County. The fudge recipes come from company President Jane Carter's late "Memere" or grandmother, who was well-known for her culinary talent and used to publish recipes in a regular column in the *St. John Valley Times*, the weekly paper for northern Aroostook County.

The announcement of the Maine Quality Centers project with Mom's Fudge is the latest in a series of new developments undertaken in the St. John Valley by NMCC in recent months. The College, in partnership with the St. John Valley Adult and Community Education Collaborative, will celebrate the official opening of the NMCC St. John Valley Center co-located at Madawaska High School on April 17. In addition, NMCC has committed to offering its associate degree in nursing program locally to students in the Valley through a combination of local courses, classes broadcast into the region using distance education technology, and clinical offerings through partnerships developed with area healthcare providers.

“We are committed to working with businesses and communities throughout Aroostook County to meet the workforce and economic development needs of the region,” said NMCC President Timothy Crowley. “We have spent a significant amount of time over the past year listening to the people of the St. John Valley and working to introduce programs and course offerings that are needed here. Time and again we have heard about the importance of diversifying the economic and employment sector. This partnership with Mom’s Fudge will help the new business to expand its workforce and employ people in the Valley in a new industry.”

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Signing the agreement which establishes Mom’s Fudge of Madawaska to be the first small business in Maine to receive customized workforce training under the Maine Community College System’s Rural Initiative were, from left: Timothy Crowley, president of Northern Maine Community College; Chad Carter, vice president of Mom’s Fudge; “mom” herself, Jane Carter, who co-founded the business with her husband, Jerry; and James McGowan, state director for Maine Quality Centers.