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Time banks offer chance to swap most valuable commodity

By Erin Rhoda erhoda@mainetoday.com
Staff Writer

MADISON -- Peter Sirois is skilled at carpentry but wants to learn to play guitar.

As a member of the Mid Maine TimeBank, if he spends an hour building a bookcase for another member, he can get an hour of labor back from any other bank member, including that guitar lesson.

It's an exchange based on time. No money is involved, and joining the time bank is free. The only problem for Sirois, of Madison, is that he has to travel to Augusta or Waterville to reach a larger pool of members.

That's why the network of time bank members is expanding into the Madison and Skowhegan area.

"This will create a local economy that will rely only on our neighbors helping each other," Sirois said. "I want to see us go back to helping each other out, and this is one way to do it."

Time banks will be the topic of a free event 6-8 p.m., Monday, at the Local 36 Union Hall, at the corner of Old Point Avenue and Preble Avenue in Madison.

Stephanie Rearick, director of a time bank in Madison, Wis., which has more than 1,900 members, is the guest speaker.

A time bank works better when joined by lots of people offering diverse skills, said Stacey Jacobsohn, coordinator of the Mid Maine TimeBank, which has an office in Augusta. Its more than 100 members are part of the TimeBanks USA network, which operates around the world.

Though several people in the Madison area are members of Mid Maine TimeBank, many more are needed to create a wide range of givers and receivers, Jacobsohn said.

Sirois said he's looking for 30 to 40 people from the Madison area to join.

People may be community drivers or check in on the elderly, Jacobsohn said. Others, such as attorneys, masseuses and business consultants, may offer their professional skills. Farmers may give vegetables or shear sheep.

Anyone can sign up, she said, including individuals, nonprofit groups, businesses, schools, food banks and local governments. People who want to join must provide references and agree to a background check.

Members' donated hours are tracked online and are redeemed by anyone within the time bank. It's not usually a direct exchange, Jacobsohn said.

People may seek others who can build a website, rake leaves or teach how to cook ethnic dishes.

Jacobsohn said she finds people more often want to give than receive.

"That's our biggest challenge is people getting over the stigma of asking for help. Sometimes they don't even know what they need," she said. "It's very important in the time bank that you also learn to receive."

Giving to others helps communities become self sufficient, she said.

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"We can take care of each other. We have all these skills and lots of work to do, and the only thing that's missing is the money. So let's not let that get in the way," she said.

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