

Opportunity knocks

Prosperity Saint John region's future is worth being part of, says architect of Benefits Blueprint

Published Saturday April 25th, 2009

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B1, Telegraph-Journal

SAINT JOHN - Saint John and Guyana are a world apart, but Dave Hardy sees huge opportunity in both.



Peter Walsh/Telegraph-Journal

Dave Hardy a Toronto consultant, takes a break on the Market Square boardwalk. His firm, Hardy Stevenson and Associates, is so positive about Saint John it plans to open a permanent office in the city.

The owner of Hardy Stevenson and Associates specializes in helping communities benefit from megaprojects. Most of his planning services are used across Canada, but now the Toronto consultant is banking on a big development in the dirt poor South American country.

"There's a hydroelectric project that I hope will transform the whole country," he said. "We're working with universities, women's groups and environmental groups to make sure there are positive spinoffs for everyone. Guyana is the third-poorest country in the western hemisphere."

Most Saint Johners wouldn't recognize Hardy if they saw him on the street, but his work is becoming well known. He's the author of Benefits Blueprint, the document sponsored by Irving Oil Ltd., the provincial government and the federal government that was released in 2008. It focused on ensuring all of New Brunswick would benefit from the local energy boom, not to mention spinoffs in retail, housing and business expansion.

"We're so positive on Saint John we've started a small home office, but we're fully intending on opening a permanent office in Saint John. I'm in Saint John every two weeks now for one reason or another."

Planner and manager Elizabeth DeLuisa is running an office out of her home that will soon be moved to formal office. Hardy hopes to do that by late summer, adding a small staff. "We see Saint John as the place we want to build our Atlantic Canada business."

The optimistic note will be part of his keynote address to the Imagine the Possibilities conference today an invitation-only event that is bringing together 125 officials from Saint John, St. Martins, Hampton, Rothesay, Quispamsis and Grand Bay-Westfield to figure out ways to co-operate and make the area better. A report from the meeting will be publicly available on Monday.

"We'll share those ideas we've learned from other places and what changes might look like and how positive they could be in the longer term," pledged the soft-spoken Hardy, whose talk gets underway at Centre Communautaire Samuel de Champlain at 12:35 p.m.

His overall message will be to keep on the path outlined in Benefits Blueprint.

Hardy says a number of his 16 major recommendations have already been acted upon or ready to advance to the next stage.

However, he says a lot more investment still needs to be dedicated to the city's five vulnerable communities - lower west side, south end, old north end, city centre and Crescent Valley. More life and skills training would help some of the most vulnerable people take advantage of the booming economy, he argues.

There's also still an opportunity to build an iconic landmark that will really put Saint John on the map, ending the confusion most Canadians have distinguishing Saint John from St. John's, N.L.

As an example, he points to the impressive Guggenheim Museum Bilbao in Spain. A Canadian, Frank Gehry, was the architect.

"It was built in the centre of Basque country, which had a weak economy, high unemployment and was beset by terrorism," Hardy says. "Governments of France and Spain did quite well in ensuring a signature, iconic facility in transforming the whole area. You look at that area as a great place to visit, a great centre of food and culture, and not what it represented back then."

Saint John has suffered in the past from a jumble of problems: too much pollution, industry downturn and population loss. However, if the rest of North America seemed heady and optimistic in the 1950s, this era might be remembered as Saint John's period of bloom.

"I'm not sure if Saint Johners are aware of how much of an incredible opportunity they have, but also how strong they are in terms of a community pulling everything together," he says. "While the economy is certainly challenging elsewhere in the world, in some sectors this is a very good time. Saint John has really not tripped or fallen since we started the Benefits Blueprint work. It's probably even better positioned than it was when we started the work."

Investors and entrepreneurs, he points out, are taking advantage of low interest rates. The local economy is more diverse than it was in recent years, and the steep population loss appears to have ebbed. Younger people are starting to stick around or move back to the area from Alberta.

"There certainly will be business winners and losers, but those that are well planned will be winners in this kind of economy," he says. "This is not a situation of bust and boom. All signs are showing continual investment in the Saint John on top of the current investment. But what's important out of

that, if we imagine the future, we can see some really good changes ahead in the environmental sector, infrastructure, development of the port, housing, tourism, the whole cultural milieu of the area - all have some tremendous possibilities."