

\$80M to combat labour shortfall

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David Smith/for the telegraph-journal

Donald Arseneault, left, minister of post-secondary education, training and labour, and Jack Kier, minister of energy, speak with reporters on Friday in Fredericton after Premier Shawn Graham announced plans to pour close to \$80 million into the province's community college system.

FREDERICTON - The Liberal government is pouring close to \$80 million into the province's community college system, largely in an effort to ensure there are sufficient workers to man energy projects in Saint John.

In a speech in the legislature Friday, Premier Shawn Graham said his government has earmarked \$44 million for the community college in Saint John. As well, he unveiled plans for a new \$35-million community college in Edmundston.

Graham said the funds are linked to next Tuesday's \$660-million capital budget, and he promised more to come for local post-secondary education. "This is just the tip of the iceberg," he said.

The premier said the province must boost its network of community colleges to fight some of the country's lowest college participation rates.

Donald Arseneault, the minister of post-secondary education, training and labour, said New Brunswick has to increase its ranks of trades people and skilled workers to ensure there are enough workers to power potential energy projects.

"We have to make sure we have a trained, skilled labour force," said the Dalhousie-area MLA, highlighting a need for pipefitters, carpenters and welders. "Right now that's a major concern."

Other than the price tags, however, the government released few details about the two projects.

According to Arseneault, the money for the Saint John college will add 600 seats to the campus. But he stressed it isn't merely a Port City announcement.

"It's not only about Saint John, this is about the whole province," he said.

Annette Albert, principal of the Saint John Community College, was elated by the news.

She said the money would allow the college to accept more than its current 1,200-1,500 students - just as the local economy appears to be growing and thirsting for workers.

That expansion would mean more students in courses ranging from early childhood education to chemistry and construction engineering.

Still, she wasn't sure if the money would merely fund campus upgrades or a brand new building.

"It's an early Christmas present for us," she said at the legislature. "We're really excited."

The funding partially fulfills recommendations put forward last April in a report focused on the province's energy potential.

The so-called Benefits Blueprint report concluded that roughly \$1.4 billion are needed to prepare New Brunswick for both the benefits and pitfalls that could arrive with a slew of Saint John energy projects.

Among the report's recommendations was a call for better worker recruitment, additional child care services, assistance for poor neighbourhoods, and road, water and sewage upgrades.

As well, it recommended a construction program at the Saint John community college.

In all, the report concluded that up to \$19 billion worth of energy projects are either underway or close to being realized.

Those include a new liquefied natural gas terminal and pipeline, the refurbishment of the Point Lepreau nuclear generating station, a possible second oil refinery and a potential second nuclear unit at Lepreau.

According to the document, which was issued by government and industry, such development could mean up to \$44 billion in spending, 33,000 jobs, and \$14.2 billion in tax revenue over 10 years.