

A blueprint for the city's benefit Road map Initiative will help community avoid boom-and-bust scenario others have experienced

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SAINT JOHN - Community leaders are hoping the Benefits Blueprint initiative announced Thursday will help focus attention on a number of efforts aimed at improving the quality of life in Saint John.

As the Port City prepares for the anticipated boom in the energy sector, the Benefits Blueprint program announced Thursday is designed to complement past efforts that will assist the Greater Saint John area to maximize the benefits from billions of dollars in investments.

"We know that there's been some tremendous work done in the past and some tremendous work that continues to occur today," said Bob Manning, chairman of Benefits Blueprint, which was unveiled to a great deal of fanfare at a press conference Thursday morning at the Delta Brunswick Hotel.

"What we're trying to do is to pull all of these things together, understand where they're all interlinked and then take a look at getting some focus on things. Our job is all about action."

Benefits Blueprint will focus on seven core areas: poverty issues, training and education, business and supplier development, infrastructure, arts and culture, workforce planning and housing.

It's an attempt by community leaders to help Saint John prepare for the future and avoid the boom-and-bust scenarios that have plagued other communities that have experienced rapid economic growth.

"We're not here to do another study and we're not here to write another report," said Manning. "What we're here to do is to outline a road map that can leverage opportunities going forward."

The project has secured \$750,000 in funding through equal contributions from the federal (Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency) and provincial (Regional Development Corporation) governments and Irving Oil.

That money will help pay for the services of Toronto-based Hardy Stevenson and Associates, a consulting firm that has managed similar megaprojects around the world and played a major role in helping Vancouver land the 2010 Winter Olympics.

The consulting firm is looking at the effects of the economic growth on Greater Saint John and the entire province.

"The impact of the growth will be felt most acutely here in Saint John," said Manning. "There will be issues that arise because of the growth, in housing, for example. So we will come up with a business case to deal with that."

"The good news about this project is that we have a strong level of interest from the federal government and the province and municipal governments and the private sector. By bringing them all together at the beginning of this planning exercise, they will all have a better understanding of the business cases that are going to be coming out."

Manning said he's pleased with the level of buy-in his group has received so far from the community

"We're going to need to identify champions, we're going to need to identify funding and we're going to need to identify action plans coming out of this consultation."

Dave Hardy, the consultant who will guide the project, says it's important that our region avoid the boom-and-bust scenarios of the past. It's something that can be done with proper strategic planning in advance, he says.

Because it's an established city with a diverse economy and a diverse housing stock, the Port City is poised to handle the growth well.

"We have to prepare properly to welcome transformational growth and avoid the mistakes other communities have made because of a lack of foresight," he said. "When we look at other centres around the world that have managed an expanding economy, Saint John is a mature city and that's a big factor that gives it an advantage and makes it different from other communities. Saint John is quite well equipped to address growth."

"We've looked at other communities that have experienced rapid growth. Given that Saint John is an established city with a long history of service provision, we're not seeing a boom-bust scenario, but rather we're seeing transformational growth."

Energy Minister Jack Keir said the Benefits Blueprint initiative will help position Greater Saint John to "optimize the benefits created by the energy hub concept."

"The groundwork for this process has been laid for more than a year, and a great deal of research has already been completed," said Keir. "This initiative will also build on the excellent planning and consultation work done by other groups in the area. The whole idea behind this is to make sure nobody gets left behind. We want to make sure there are opportunities for all the folks in Saint John who want to take advantage of those opportunities."