

Foundation for growth

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For more than three years, business, labour and students have been calling on government to expand community college programs. Two reports on post-secondary education stressed the importance of an expansion. The Benefits Blueprint initiative identified it as a prerequisite to expanding energy sector development.

On Friday, the Graham government responded in a big way, pledging \$44 million for the community college in Saint John and \$35 million for a new college in Edmundston. With these capital investments, NBCC should have expanded programs up and running in two years.

The provincial government deserves credit for making this investment in spite of tougher economic projections. Without labour force development, growth in jobs for New Brunswickers will be limited. Investing in NBCC is the right thing to do to move the provincial and national economies ahead.

New Brunswick is fighting two trends - a national labour shortage and very low participation in the community college system. At campuses such as NBCC Saint John, the low participation rate is a matter of restricted space, not limited interest. In some cases, more than 2,000 students have applied for 700 student spaces. Demand is particularly high for pipefitters, welders and carpenters. The sooner the province can reduce the waiting list for enrollment, the faster these prospective tradespeople will be able to obtain jobs.

The investment in Saint John alone should create about 600 new seats. The applicants will come from all over the province - and they'll graduate as construction on projects in the city's energy hub is peaking.

What makes this announcement especially important is the recognition that workforce development and job creation are linked. Without enough skilled labour, some of New Brunswick's energy megaprojects might not be constructed. By investing \$79 million in education, the government hopes to secure \$19 billion in direct investment, \$44 billion in economic activity, 33,000 jobs and billions in new tax revenues. It's an investment worth making.

Premier Graham has promised more announcements ahead in a capital budget worth \$660 million. We hope some of those announcements will address other recommendations in Benefits Blueprint, including creating an energy skills centre of excellence, regional hospital expansion and investments in medical education.