

Taking a new direction

Energy Team will announce hiring of individual to take reins of Benefits Blueprint, give update

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Energy Minister Jack Keir says Ottawa is also willing to play a part in the Benefits Blueprint process. He said negotiations are continuing to see where Ottawa sees itself fitting in.

SAINT JOHN - There is a critical turn approaching on the Benefits Blueprint road map to prosperity.

On Wednesday morning, during a breakfast with the region's mayors and councillors, the blueprint development team will announce the hiring of a staff person to start driving the plan's agenda and to lead the charge from Saint John's perspective.

Until now, the plan has been volunteer-driven.

Energy Minister Jack Keir, the province's liaison with the Benefits Blueprint committee, is being tight-lipped about who is taking the reins until Wednesday's announcement, which will also include an update for newly elected municipal officials on exactly where the blueprint stands, and what the energy hub means - not just to Saint John and southern New Brunswick - but to the whole province.

It will be the first time that municipalities have been included in the process.

"I think it's imperative that municipalities have buy-in here," said Keir during a meeting with the Telegraph-Journal's editorial board Monday.

"They have to be a partner at the table."

The Benefits Blueprint lays out a detailed plan of how billions of dollars can be made if the province seizes opportunities presented by six huge energy-related industrial projects in the region.

The trick is to plan well in advance of rapid economic development that the committee expects will create 33,000 jobs provincewide, will mean up to \$44 billion in spending and \$14.2 billion in tax revenue over 10 years.

The other trick is convincing the province that everyone will benefit from the plan's \$750-million price tag; to that end, Keir has been selling the plan as the way to self-sufficiency.

"Everybody around the table agrees that we've got one crack at this to do it right," he said. "When I say, 'nobody gets left behind,' that's not just for Saint John or southern New Brunswick, that's the whole province.

"If we follow that Benefits Blueprint plan and do it right, we can make sure nobody gets left behind."

The federal government is also willing to play a part, said Keir, but the specifics of that relationship are still being worked out.

"We're still in negotiations to see where they see themselves fitting in to future funding. They want to make sure they have a pot of money that fits where we want to go next," he said.

Keir identifies workforce retention, repatriation and immigration as the plan's top priority because even if a second refinery and second reactor are in the cards, nothing can be done without workers.

"And not just tradespeople, but accountants and lawyers," he said.

"It's not just the responsibility of government, it's the responsibility of all of us, including parents. It's more than just construction; we've got to get our head around this.

"It's going to be long-term, expertise-driven technology that's going to stay with the energy hub for years and years."

Right now, there are \$4 billion worth of projects going on in the region of an estimated \$19 billion worth of energy projects that are close to being formally announced, mainly in the Saint John area.

The boom is giving the Rockwood Park campground its busiest year yet, says Keir.

"And it has nothing to do with tourism - it's because folks are parking their trailers out there because they've got nowhere to live while they work these jobs.

"It's here now. This is happening," Keir said.