

Greater Saint John has improved its own self-image and has an MLA in a key government portfolio. Now it is selling itself to the world.



PHOTO: SAINT JOHN VISITOR & CONVENTION BUREAU

COMMUNITY VISION

BY BRIAN MACLAUGHLIN

Greater Saint John, which incorporates Saint John and its surrounding communities, has impressive credentials. It is Atlantic Canada's oldest incorporated city, New Brunswick's largest urban centre, the province's second-largest bilingual community, and one of Canada's busiest ports.

Over the past half-decade, the economy of the Saint John area has entered a new era. Once largely dependent on government initiatives (such as the federal frigate program) and provincial re-investment

into failed private-public sector initiatives (such as Market Square), Saint John is now capturing national headlines as a vital centre for business.

At least that is the image projected by an economic development initiative that is driven by local business leaders and aimed at investors on Bay Street and Wall Street. Despite the winding down of its largest employer, the DND frigate program, and a lacklustre real estate market, there are many indicators of economic renewal.

The latest milestone occurred in 1992, with the



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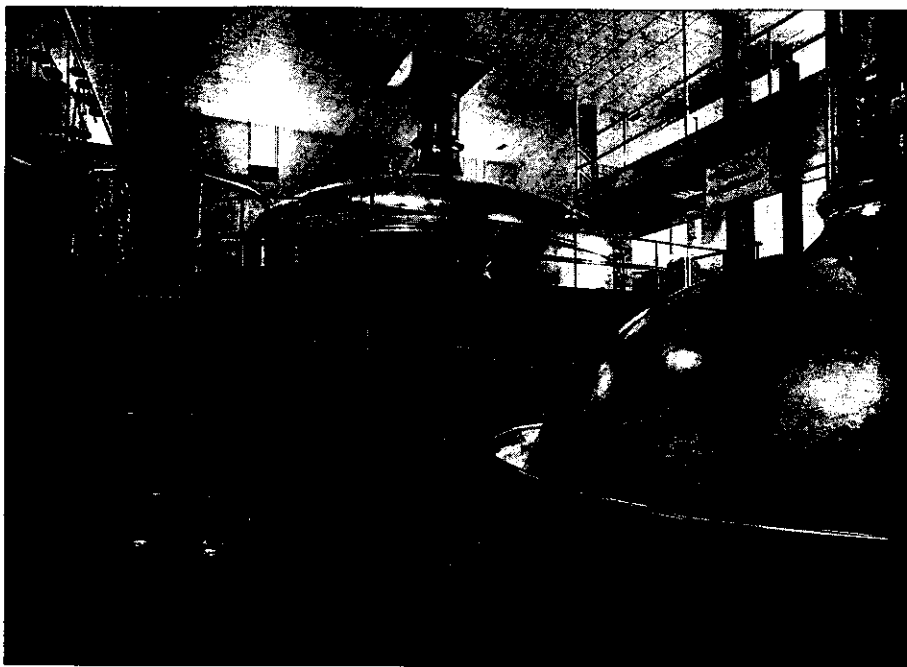
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Brewing Moosehead beer: the Oland family's commitment to the city.

formation of the Greater Saint John Economic Development Commission. This group of 12 business leaders directs the activities of Enterprise Saint John, the agency charged with promoting the region and its economy.

Enterprise Saint John has compiled an impressive brochure and video, lauding the "advantages unlimited" of the city as a centre for 21st-century business investment. And it has sent signals to the McKenna government (via a Saint John Day Conference, held in Fredericton last Fall) that Saint John—previously decried by McKenna as a community in serious need of "a vision"—has a vibrant attitude about its economic future.

The aim of the initiative is to reshape the city's image by influencing the economic, social and cultural evolution of a traditionally quiet, conservative community.

Stephen Carson is the general manager of Enterprise Saint John. A former executive in the Irving empire, he says he has observed a tremendous increase in confidence within Saint John's business community over the past five years. As catalysts, he cites the challenge of the 1991-92 recession and the shift of

economic development responsibilities from the municipal bureaucracy to the private sector.

Enterprise Saint John has taken centre stage with its new location in the city's uptown core, which houses its namesake organization, an ACOA office, a branch

of the province's Department of Economic Development and Tourism department, the Fundy Region Development Commission, a branch of the Research and Productivity Council of New Brunswick, Uptown Saint John Inc. and the Saint John Board of Trade. The new set-up provides a focus for business-prospecting, and reduces duplication of services.

Carson is confident Enterprise Saint John's marketing efforts and business relocation accomplishments are turning local perceptions around. Over the past two years Canada Trust, Meditrust, Northern Telecom, the TD Green

Line and Xerox have moved operations into the area.

"We're very fortunate to have a core group of dedicated, family-owned businesses, such as Moosehead Breweries, Simms, Crosby's Molasses and the Irving companies, that are



"There's no magic to economic development"

—Steve Carson
GM of Enterprise Saint John

committed to making things happen in Saint John," says Carson. Had these entities been operated from corporate board rooms outside of Atlantic Canada, he suggests, they may have abandoned the city in difficult economic times. "We still need these industries, but we are also attracting new industries like telecommunications—NBTel and Fundy Cable are headquartered here—which in turn attract more service companies."

The Port of Saint John, which specializes in breakbulk (unitized, non-containerized) cargoes, is another long-term success. Boosted by a thriving forest products industry, the port handled the third largest tonnage in Canada last year. On the horizon is a budding environmental industry, with companies developing new technologies in partnership with Irving mills, for example.

"There's no magic to economic development," says Carson, acknowledging that Saint John is relatively new at the process compared to Moncton. He says it will be up to the combined efforts of the city's business leaders, as well as the energies of volunteer "working committees," to sell the advantages of doing business of the city.

Last summer, Saint John gained national recognition when it was



Saint John calling: NBTel's presence is attracting more service companies.

heralded as one of Canada's top five cities for business by *The Globe and Mail's Report On Business (ROB)* magazine. Saint John even out-paced Moncton—often touted as its rival in economic development. Similarly, the Canadian Federation of Independent Business

named Saint John as Atlantic Canada's friendliest city for business.

Enterprise Saint John has lost no time in using ROB's endorsement for "bragging rights," notes Joel Levesque, an advertising and public relations executive with the Saint John office of

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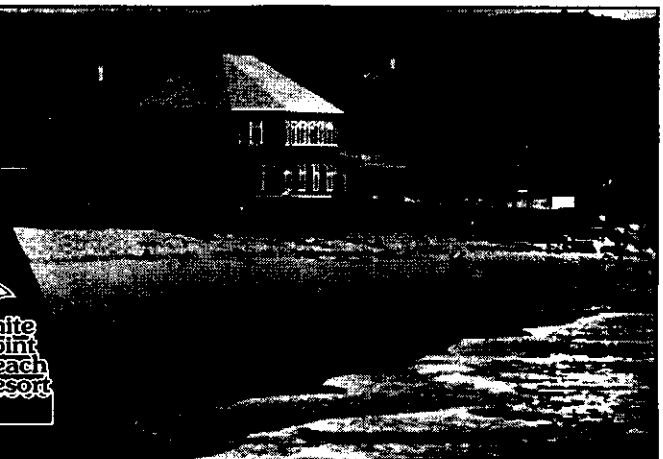
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The Port of Saint John specializes in breakbulk cargo

Corporate Communications Ltd., who recently completed Enterprise Saint John's first marketing strategy. All promotional material now denotes Saint John as "Canada's Premier City for Business"—a phrase hijacked from the ROB article.

While researching a diverse mix of 20

local senior executives in an informal survey, Levesque says he obtained surprisingly consistent results: "No matter what their business was, they all said the same things about Saint John's strengths."

Some of those key findings, which were also incorporated into the strategy,

emphasized the city's quality workforce, strong sense of community, quality of life, ideal geographic location as a year-round port, low cost of operating businesses (low workers compensation and taxation rates), improving highway systems, affordable real estate, new venues such as Harbour Station and the Imperial Centre, and natural amenities (the Irving nature park).

"Put it all together and you've got all the ingredients for a great business mix," says Levesque. Out of all those he interviewed, he says only one person "was not really 100 per cent positive" about the city.

Yet some local critics continue to hammer away at the McKenna government's integrity, accusing the provincial helmsman and his economic development crew of largely ignoring the interests of the province's largest economic contributor.

One of the most prominent critics is Elsie Wayne, the city's MP. As the former mayor of Saint John, she was instrumental in the initiative to move the economic development mandate away from City Hall. Two years later, she questions whether this initiative was worthwhile.



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Wayne feels Enterprise Saint John is not aggressive enough in selling the city and questions whether Enterprise Saint John and the Board of Trade have the backbone to tackle the provincial government on the tough business issues concerning the city's growth. Moreover, she suggests that Premier McKenna's promotion of a new economic development minister from her local riding is just political smoke and mirrors in a provincial election year.

Wayne says her constituency office has received complaints from local business people about an inherent bias against Saint John in the economic development game. She recalls strong impressions of previous dealings with the provincial department's deputy minister: "His (Francis McQuire's) whole focus was going to be Moncton, he was going to turn Moncton into the economic development centre for the province."

Last January, Wayne criticized the McKenna government's salesmanship that saw United Parcel Service relocate almost 1,000 jobs to the province. Considering that tax dollars were used to lure the jobs to New Brunswick, she is disappointed that none of these went to Saint John, while approximately 600 went to Moncton, and the remainder to

Fredericton.

As well, she complains of what she considers to be "off-loading" of services crucial to the port city: downsizing at St. Joseph's Hospital, loss of the local airport's control tower, and the bypassing of the city by the premier's proposal for the Trans Canada Highway. "The Loyalist city is not getting its fair share," she argues.

Wayne also says Saint John's area MLAs don't provide strong enough representation, while the local business community is afraid of criticizing the premier.

Longtime small businessman and politician Leo McAdam is one of those MLAs. Last summer, he was picked to head New Brunswick's department of economic development and tourism. From the outset of his appointment to this high-profile, high-expectations portfolio, McAdam has become a tough sell for McKenna.

McAdam—much older than his youthful predecessor Denis Losier—exudes a relaxed, down-to-earth persona. On his initial appointment to the post, which he considers to be "the busiest department in the government, other than the premier's office," he told

the media he was comfortable with a laissez-faire approach to leading the department.

Now, after a year on the job, McAdam says his department has "an excellent, efficient staff." He contends that if an inherent bias against Saint John had existed before, there is no evidence of it in the department now.

McAdam says his responsibilities as minister for business and job creation will not be limited to only southern New Brunswick. "My job is to entice business prospects to New Brunswick. Then I have an obligation to try and stay out of it." At that point, he says, it is up to the rest of the area's MLAs to steer possible business investment towards Saint John, and Enterprise Saint John has to make a convincing sales pitch from a business-to-business standpoint.

Commenting on the local area's history of "too much negativism," McAdam says attitudes have been improving since the early 1980s when the Canada Games were held in the city. "Now there's an enthusiasm that makes you feel alive!" As for Carson, after a year on the job, he feels he's in the right place at the right time. "I'm having a ball," he says. **FMS**

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