

# Regional trade board closer

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RYAN MELANSON | Telegraph-Journal  
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SAINT JOHN – The process of establishing a new, regional chamber of commerce for the Greater Saint John area has begun its next step forward this week, though those involved say a merger of various community organizations isn't a done deal yet.

The chambers announced their intention to form a new partnership in August, and meetings are now being held to discuss the implications of a new group with the members who would be represented by it.

Monday saw the Kennebecasis Valley Chamber of Commerce discuss the issue and a meeting was held by the West Side Business Association on Tuesday. Next Monday will see the Saint John Board of Trade members meet, and the series of discussions will wrap up on Oct. 8 with the River Valley Chamber of Commerce.

Saint John Board of Trade chair Eric Poirier said reaction from member businesses was extremely positive at both Monday and Tuesday's meeting.

"But I don't want to skip steps," he said.

"I think people are seeing the opportunity, but it's important for us to continue to connect and engage, because in the end it's the membership of each of our organizations that will decide."

Poirier said the benefits to having a region-wide organization representing businesses are clear.

"It's all about trying to enhance the value our members receive. About 80 per cent of our members are small businesses, and the networking component is huge. The larger the network, the more opportunity there is to connect, learn from each other and do business with each other."

A larger group would also lend more clout to advocacy work on behalf of business, he said.

"There's a lot of power in speaking with one voice."

Poirier added further benefits could include better access to health plans, or special member-to-member business deals. Together, the four associations have 1,000 member businesses that employ around 35,000 people across the region.

The main issue or concern being raised from chamber members so far, and expected to continue to be raised, focuses around a possible loss of voice, with small, unique chambers disappearing into a regional behemoth.

“Every area obviously has pride in what they’ve been able to accomplish, and along with that comes a sense of ownership. Everyone knows there will be benefits that come with having a bigger voice, but you don’t want to lose that identity,” said KV Chamber of Commerce president Jennifer Higgins.

She said the reaction of her members at Monday’s meeting could be summed up as cautious optimism.

“There are always smaller issues within each community that are very near and dear to our own hearts, but may not be necessarily the number one priority for a larger group,” she said.

Higgins said small business owners may become intimidated if they need to bring specific concerns to a board of people they aren’t familiar with, and ensuring clear communication paths with all members will be an absolute priority if a regional chamber is to succeed.

West side Coun. Greg Norton, who attended Tuesday’s meeting, said west side businesses are expressing the same singular concern, but it’s overrun by the positive. He said one owner summed it up well in saying her business and customer base doesn’t simply end at the Reversing Falls or Harbour Bridge.

“This is exactly what our city of Saint John needs in terms of uniting our business community into one, to have us all singing off that same proverbial song sheet. I applaud them,” he said.

Poirier said he expects feedback to be similarly positive at the next two meetings, and leaders of all four groups will reflect on the next step come October, which will involve discussion as to how the governance structure would work.

He said a regional board would mirror its membership, with representation from each area, and a VP spot reserved on the executive for a leader of each original group. It’s a start on the way to address concerns about identity loss, he said.

“The real power in this partnership is actually to be able to maintain that grassroots identity, while still having the larger network, still being able to connect and being attuned to each other’s opportunities and challenges, so we can advocate strongly for everybody, with a collective focus on moving the region forward.”