

ELECTION

Higgs talks rising rents, economic development in chamber forum



Tory Leader Blaine Higgs takes questions from a virtual forum hosted by chambers of commerce in New Brunswick.

Photo: Tom Bateman/Times & Transcript

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Tom Bateman | Provincial Reporter

Progressive Conservative Leader Blaine Higgs said he knows there are increasing levels of concerns about rents in the province.

"I really just learned about it in the last few weeks of travelling around the province," he said. "I've had people come up to me and say, 'My rent just went up \$250 and I don't how I can afford that.'"

Higgs made the comments during Tuesday's virtual forum hosted by the Fredericton, Moncton and Saint John chambers of commerce, in response to a call from Fredericton Mayor Mike O'Brien about the connection between homelessness and issues with addiction and mental health.

The PC leader pointed to his party's commitment to crack down on crystal meth use, including more investment in youth programming, residential addiction treatment programs, bolstering mobile crisis response teams and a new RCMP task force targeting drug traffickers.

Over half of the weapons-related calls to police are "directly tied" to crystal meth, Higgs said.

Rents have been relatively stable in the province, he said, but the increases seem to be tied to higher interest in real estate in the province of late.

Higgs said it's likely going to create "new problems that will require new solutions," but the provincial government is already partnering with Ottawa to create about 5,100 new or renovated homes in the system in the next few years.

The hour-long forum gave Higgs several opportunities to flex his business credentials, while taking questions on immigration and newcomers, economic development, inter-

provincial relations, health care, COVID-19 recovery and small modular nuclear reactors.

Higgs mused about how to better divide the province into regions, referring to a presentation made last month for all party leaders about the province's 300-odd Local Service Districts, regional service commissions, economic development regions, health authorities and other jurisdictions.

"For me, it was understanding: what should every region have for amenities to allow it to be successful and progress in a way that people would want to live there – it has a great rink, a hospital, the right school system?" he said. "How should a region look to attract people to live there so there's not disadvantages to move from one place to another?"

On interprovincial relations, Higgs said he sees opportunities to collaborate with other Atlantic provinces on things like bidding, and co-operating on various certifications.

The ability of the four premiers, two conservative and two Liberal, to collaborate on lobbying Ottawa during the COVID-19 crisis showed Higgs where the region's "strength can be," he said.

The province's economies have to complement each other, and provincial governments shouldn't compete on things like wooing major companies with financial incentives.

"We're both eating our own lunch here so let's set up a process for development - it would be very helpful," Higgs said.

The PC leader travelled to Moncton later on Tuesday, and will prepare for debates through the day on Wednesday.