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ACTUALITÉS

IS SAINT JOHN MAKING A COMEBACK?



KURT PEACOCK AT A CROSSROADS

More than a few eyebrows were raised when Saint John's earnest mayor Mel Norton declared in a September interview with this newspaper that the city had in fact "turned a corner."

Certainly, if the city had indeed turned a corner, it wasn't yet apparent in the key indicators. The local unemployment rate has been in the double digits for months as the Saint John region flirts with the dubious distinction of having the highest joblessness rate among major Canadian urban centres.

Eyebrows were raised further when Norton said he wanted the city to be the "shining light of New Brunswick."

While Saint John's metropolitan ambitions have been in place ever since New Brunswick was established as a colony separate from Nova Scotia, it's fair to state that its metropolitan status has seen better days. Its city hall spent much of the last few years embroiled in a municipal pension crisis, complete with an ill-considered lawsuit. Too many sidewalks are in disrepair, and there remain too many older apartment buildings that look Dickensian in their drabness. To add to the anguish, Saint John's much-loved junior hockey team is in rebuilding mode.

Then there's the intraprovincial rivalry. Moncton's population growth has easily outpaced the Port City's over the last three decades, and there is a very good chance that Saint John will be New Brunswick's second city by the time the next census is taken. (In fact, when you count the suburbs, metro Moncton is already larger.)

Still, there are signs others share the mayor's optimism, and all the fresh faces on council may have something to do with it. Satisfaction with the municipal government is generally favourable – coming in at 63 per cent, according to an August survey from Corporate Research Associates.

There are also signals that local optimism may be opening consumers' wallets. The CRA's latest data show that Saint John has a consumer confidence score higher than the province of New Brunswick; the city's confidence index actually trailed the rest of the province for most of 2011 and the first half of 2012.

But is the optimism sustainable without new economic growth? Norton is certainly not the first city mayor to talk a big game – Elsie Wayne used to go further, declaring Saint John to be "the greatest little city in the East." Other public officials from the Port City have made similar boosterish claims, a rhetorical trait not uncommon in municipal government.

Norton's first Saint John mayor in a few years, however, to be in office while events may suggest that the city's metropolitan ambitions can actually be realized. The local frenzy over the Energy East pipeline proposal is certainly the most talked-about example, but there are other less obvious examples of change afoot. The Saint John Board of Trade – one of the oldest business associations in Canada – is taking on a much more activist public role. It was an early champion of the pipeline proposal, and current partnership talks with the suburban chambers of commerce may turn the Board of Trade into the most significant business lobby in New Brunswick, with a regional membership of more than 1,000 businesses.

"I think we need to get better at celebrating our successes," argues David Duplisea, the board of trade's executive director, who has embraced the new optimistic tone. "Focusing on the negative all the time – it's not that productive."

Other signals of optimism are found in the city's uptown core, which is surviving the economic downturn surprisingly well – even with double-digit unemployment. The last time Saint John's unemployment rate was this high for so long was in the late-1990s, and the city centre was a lot emptier than it is today. Now, a restaurant row has formed along the streets of Prince William, Princess and Canterbury, and the last census showed population growth

throughout the city core for the first time in decades. The restaurants are no doubt struggling, but at least they're still open.

There's also a growing cultural scene, one celebrated last Saturday night with a red carpet fundraiser on Canterbury Street in support of the innovative and largely underground Third Space Gallery.

I asked Judith Mackin, one of the organizers behind the Gala-Vant event, if there really is something tangible in the air.

"We're doing what we should be doing in this city – we're even using our parking lots as creative spaces," says Mackin, after more than 200 guests filled an up-town lot to witness the unveiling of a new set of murals.

Mackin notes how Saint John has long been ignored by federal and provincial cultural bureaucrats, yet the city's creative scene is flourishing regardless – as if the lack of government money has produced a more inventive artistic scene.

"Our city is notorious for creating entrepreneurs – and our artists are entrepreneurs," argues Mackin, who points to painters like Sarah Jones, who operates out of a quaint studio and living space on Duke Street, in one of the narrowest buildings in New Brunswick.

"When you look at the history of our city ... we really just do our own stuff – we have to."

Another sign of optimism? Building permits are slowly ticking upward, after being flat for the last number of years. One of the permits was for a derelict building on Charles Street, a shell of a structure that was a highly visible blight seen from the highway that bisects the city. Now, it's an attractive Victorian three-storey, immaculately developed.

"Saint John has a collection of heritage properties like no other," says young developer Jonathan Northrup, who rehabilitated the Charles Street property along with his partner Michael Cummings. "Even some of these plain looking boarded up buildings have many original features still intact and, with some scraping and painting, transform into stately Victorian homes."

Over the last few years, Northrup and Cummings have invested not just on Charles Street, but in other areas of the city core – including long-neglected streets like Paddock or Waterloo.

"These 'old buildings' are a major tourist attraction, and tourists leave their money in the city," notes Northrup. "Saint Johners should think, this is something we've already got going for us – let's put this asset to work."

Others have made similar conclusions; there are presently a number of hungry young development companies in the city, slowly renewing entire blocks. If the pipeline proposal comes to fruition, the wholesale housing renewal will likely accelerate.

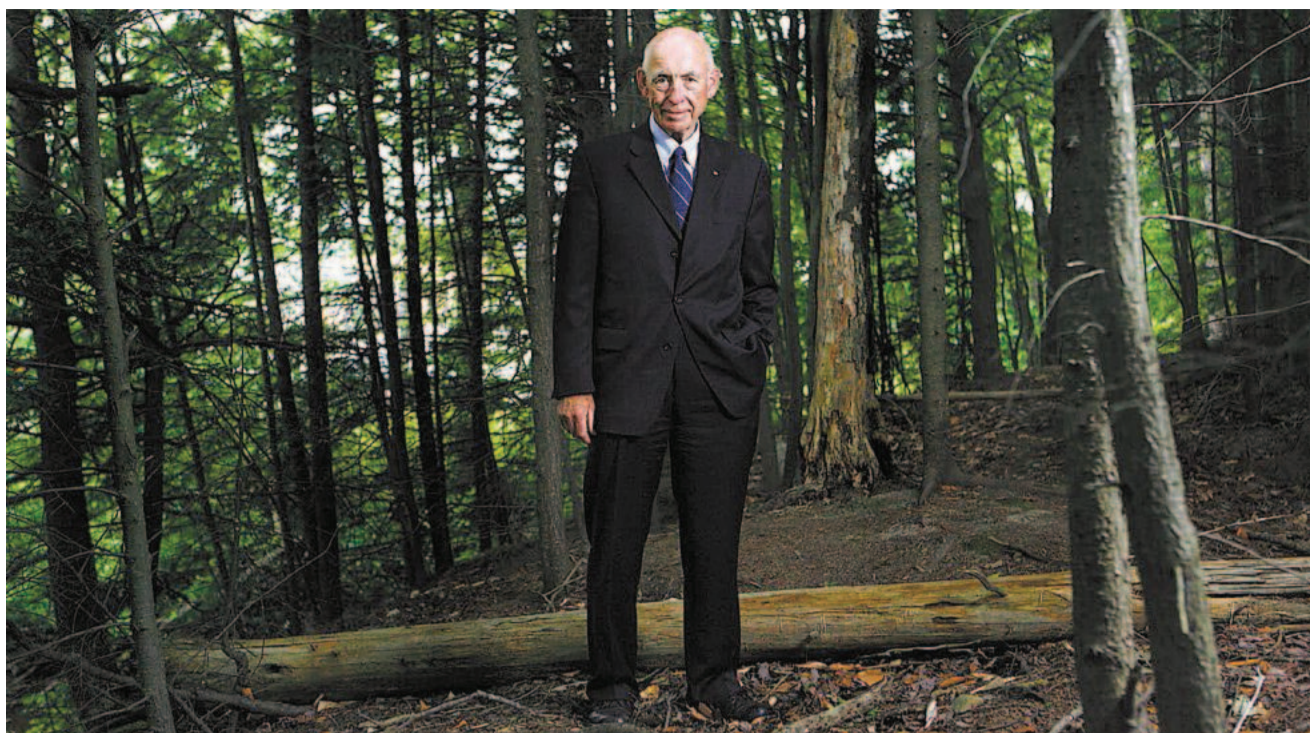
The Energy East pipeline is still a few years off, serving as a reminder that Saint John isn't out of the woods yet – it won't be until more of its residents are able to find work. Even within the labour market data, however, there are positive signals. In the five years since the crash on Wall Street plunged North America into recession, Saint John has added around 2,000 individuals to its labour force. Not a large amount, but during the same period the rest of New Brunswick saw its labour force actually shrink in size.

There's also still much to improve in Saint John, especially in the inner city where too many families live in poverty. The city also needs to square its energy ambitions with environmental realities, a concern that is most prevalent among the city's youngest residents. And there is always a chance that the pendulum between hope and despair could shift once more in the near future – as it always has, throughout the city's history.

Still, the recent signs of civic optimism can't help but remind this observer of the words of the poet Alden Nowlan, who once wrote: "I admit that I belong to that little band of eccentrics who feel something very much like love for Saint John."

It's almost hard to believe given the stalled jobs data, but these days it would appear that the little band of eccentrics is growing.

Kurt Peacock is a columnist with the Telegraph-Journal. Reach him at telegraph.kurt@telegraphjournal.com. At a Crossroads is a multi-part series running Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, examining economic and political trends facing the province and region.



Bud Bird, director of the Miramichi Salmon Association's fundraising drive, says the conservation campaign has already reached 85 per cent of its goal. PHOTO: MATTHEW SHERWOOD/TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL ARCHIVE

Salmon campaign approaching \$2 million

Fundraiser Director expects donations will surpass goal

CHRIS MORRIS
LEGISLATURE BUREAU

FREDERICTON – A campaign to raise money for long-term conservation efforts on the Miramichi River is expected to exceed its \$2-million goal.

Bud Bird, a director of the Miramichi Salmon Association's fundraising drive, said the campaign has already reached about 85 per cent of its \$2-million target, and there are still six months left to go.

The campaign, known as "Miramichi Forever Funds," is being run in both Canada and the United States. It marks the 60th anniversary of the salmon association.

"I think we will exceed our goal by a significant amount," said Bird, a longtime angler and member of the Miramichi Salmon Association for at least 30 years.

"It is an amazing response to a conservation campaign designed to establish long-term funding to ensure that future conservation on the Miramichi River for Atlantic salmon, and the watershed in general, will continue long after those of us who are now involved are gone."

Bird, a former provincial and federal politician, will be honoured for his contributions to conservation at an association dinner on Tuesday.

When he was New Brunswick's minister of natural resources in the early 1980s, he brought in, among other

things, tagging and hook-and-release programs.

He is a tireless fighter for the wild Atlantic salmon, which he has watched decline over his lifetime in New Brunswick.

"We're all very concerned about the future of the Miramichi salmon – the runs are approaching all-time lows and the decline has been ongoing for (many years)," Bird said.

"But we don't despair – the salmon is the symbol of the environment in eastern Canada and it's a resource that we must simply find a way to save."

There are a number of theories as to why fewer salmon return each year to their Miramichi spawning grounds, including increased fishing pressure off Greenland and predation by species such as striped bass and seals.

Bird said the fundraising drive has had 160 gifts of up to \$5,000; 42 donations of \$5,000; 12 of \$10,000; 15 of \$25,000; one gift of \$50,000 and three gifts of \$100,000 – including one from an American donor.

The campaign got a huge boost earlier this year when the late artist Bruno Bobak, a devoted angler, bequeathed \$400,000 in his estate for the salmon association.

"The cross-section of support is amazing," Bird said.

"The magnitude of this campaign is really unheard of in this part of the environmental community."

The intent of the Miramichi Forever campaigns, one based in Canada and another based in the United States, is to continue to receive and allocate discretionary donations, endowment

contributions, long-term trust commitments and bequests from individuals, families, companies and institutions who want to ensure conservation on the storied Miramichi River.

Bird said the money will be used to create an endowment fund that will fund research and conservation programs well into the future.

"We hope as a result of this campaign we will be able to do a more intensive analysis of what is actually happening to the smolts, the young salmon as they go to sea, and what is happening from the time they leave freshwater and get into the estuary and into the bay," he said.

"Early studies have indicated to us that frequently only half of the smolts that leave the head of tide get to the open ocean – so something is happening very significantly within the estuary, whether it's predators, striped bass or seals, disease, industrial applications or whatever ... we just don't know and it deserves a great deal of studying."

The Miramichi Salmon Association was formed in 1953 by conservationists from New Brunswick and New England wanting to protect and preserve the Atlantic salmon.

The group's work covers the Miramichi River watershed, covering the main Southwest and Northwest branches, along with 37 tributaries and 7,700 individual small streams. The Miramichi watershed sees the largest run of wild Atlantic salmon in North America and as a result contributes \$20 million and 637 full-time equivalent jobs to the province's economy each year.

—With files from Kris McDavid

Insurance agency offers tips for car crashes

THE DAILY GLEANER

A national insurance agency is encouraging drivers to brush up on their knowledge of how to handle fender-benders.

A recent poll by TD Insurance revealed while 89 per cent of drivers are somewhat or extremely likely to know what to do following an auto-accident, only 31 per cent knew the exact steps to take.

"Fender-benders resulting from drivers making sudden stops in intersections, or pulling out of a parking spot without checking first happen every day, so it's important to be prepared and know what steps to take afterwards," said Dave Minor, a vice-president at TD Insurance.

Minor offered the following five tips for drivers who find themselves in an accident:

- Stay calm. Try not to panic or make rash decisions. When speaking with the other party involved, don't accept money or admit fault for the collision and don't just agree to forget about it.

- Make sure everyone is safe. If anyone is injured, don't move them, as doing so could worsen their injuries. Move your

vehicle out of the flow of traffic if you can do it safely and without causing further damage.

- Call the police. Call 911 to report the accident if anyone is injured, if you believe there is major damage to your vehicle, or if you think a criminal act may have been committed. For non-emergency collisions where no one is injured and there is only minor damage (less than \$1,000) to your vehicle, it might be a good idea to call the police. They might direct you to your provincial collision reporting centre.

- Take notes that include details of the accident and identification of the vehicles and people involved, including emergency personnel or witnesses on scene. If possible, take pictures or video, and/or draw a diagram of the accident scene to assist with documentation of a claim. Keep a notepad, pencil, and a checklist of things to do after a collision in your glove compartment.

- Call your insurer. Twenty-eight per cent of drivers polled incorrectly believed that if they were in an accident, they only needed to report it to their

insurance provider if their car sustained significant damage. Most insurance policies require you to report any accident involving loss or damage to people or property. If you don't report an accident, it may affect your coverage down the road. If another driver involved reports the accident, their insurance company may contact your insurance provider, which could lead to cancellation or non-renewal of your policy if you have not reported the accident yourself.

"Your insurance provider can confirm all of the information you should be collecting from the other party," Minor said. "They can also offer a list of recommended repair shops in your area that can help with getting your vehicle back in shape even faster. Review your policy before repairs are made to make sure you understand the limitations of your coverage."

Minor also recommended drivers keep an emergency kit, including items like a first aid kit, road flares and a flashlight with extra batteries, in your vehicle in case of emergencies.

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