

Duplisea decries slim small business support in province's budget



David Duplisea and the Saint John Region Chamber of Commerce are critical of what they say is the provincial budget's lack of support for small businesses.

Sean Mott | Telegraph-Journal

SAINT JOHN • David Duplisea knows the provincial government was in a tough position this year with the budget, but he still feels more room could have been made for small businesses that have been bearing the brunt of COVID-19's harm.

Duplisea, the CEO of the Saint John Region Chamber of Commerce, is voicing his criticism of the province's 2021-

2022 budget, noting how there doesn't appear to be much new support for the hospitality and tourism industries that have struggled under safety protocols and restrictions since the pandemic began a year ago.

"We would have liked things framed around recovery plans," he said. "One of the sectors that's fallen through the cracks are sole proprietors. They don't fit in anywhere."

Anne McShane, the owner of the Feel Good Store in uptown Saint John, said she hasn't looked at the provincial budget yet, but she's managed to use federal funding to keep her business going through the pandemic.

"(The provincial government is) there in spirit," she said. "I'm sure there's some provincial programs we can tap into."

McShane noted that some provincial programs can be difficult to receive approval for.

Duplisa said the provincial government was stuck in a catch 22 situation with this year's budget, noting how focusing on some sectors would inevitably leave out other sectors. He referred to the laundry list of issues as "so many whack-a moles everywhere."

Duplisa said small businesses need a hand up as they enter another year of COVID-19 restrictions, although 2021 is hoped to be less harmful than 2020.

"Other jurisdictions have looked at tax deferral models, elimination of double taxations for non-owner-occupied units and other similar initiatives, but we see little effort to move in this direction," said Duplisa.

Duplisa praised part of the budget, which is projected to run a \$244.8 million deficit. He said positive elements such as \$10.8 million to increase the availability of affordable housing units and \$7 million toward mental health services.

"Mental health and addiction is out of control, and we have to acknowledge it's all our [business]," he said.

Duplisea said small businesses in the hospitality and tourism industries need to be supported as they are a key part of returning the province to normality as it continues to march toward recovery.

"Small businesses are the ones that welcome visitors," he said. "We need to give people confidence and faith."

Despite the setbacks, Duplisea is more optimistic for businesses in 2021 than he was in 2020. He said the recent announcement of the return of the Atlantic bubble in April is a positive sign, one that could give people hope.

"Success breeds success," he said. "In bad times, communities come together."