

'Workcation' sees big interest in early months



David Duplisea, CEO of the Saint John Region Chamber of Commerce, said the new 'workcation' program is seeing a lot of interest in its first months.

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Sean Mott | Telegraph-Journal

SAINT JOHN • A pilot project designed to bring digital nomads to Saint John is off to a strong start two months after it launched.

The "Workcation" program, which is designed to bring people with remotely based jobs to the port city, kicked off in January with the goal of bringing 20 families and individuals to Saint John for six-week stays. Now, in the middle of March, they

have received 81 applications from across Canada, with 16 applicants already looking to arrive in the summer and fall months.

"The response is great and a lot of people are interested in it," said David Duplisea, CEO of the Saint John Region Chamber of Commerce. "People are ready to come to Saint John."

The Workcation project is a joint-effort from the Chamber, Ustation, Envision Saint John (the new regional economic development agency), Uptown Saint John and the provincial government. Duplisea said other groups will be able to take the data and experience from the project's first year in the port city and map it over their own homes to attract people.

"We're exploring a model that would help with population growth," Duplisea said. "People are looking to move now because of COVID. How can we reach those people?"

The Workcation program is designed to cater to applicants' interests to help them get to know the city over a six-week period. Duplisea describes it as a "try before you buy" approach, showcasing Saint John's strengths and tailoring them for applicants.

"If we can get them here, we can get them a concierge experience," he said. "We're convinced we can convince people to stay here."

Duplisea said applications have been flooding in since the program officially started in January. The group received close to 100 applications, many from British Columbia and urban centres such as Toronto and Montreal. They even fielded an applicant from Moncton.

Duplisea said the program is broken into tiers. The first tier is for applicants who have been completely vetted and plan to visit. The program will subsidize a portion of their trip. The second tier is for people who will visit, but won't receive a

travel and accommodation subsidy. The third tier is for people who are still exploring the program's offerings.

"There is skin in the game," Duplisea said. "It's not a free vacation. We have 16 people in the first tier. We have people wanting to come now, but we have to postpone. First group of people will hopefully come in the summer."

Duplisea said the project's goal is to "close" six individuals or families this year, meaning they choose Saint John as their new home.

Duplisea said the group targeted people age 25-35, but so far 40 per cent of applicants are between 35 and 45. He said the project will continue to collect data as it progresses this year.

"This is great from a data mining perspective," he said. "The data will be able to be used province-wide."