



## **SAINT JOHN REGION REVVING BACK UP**

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COMMENTARY

The Saint John region is returning to full growth mode after more than two years of hardship. Many businesses are bustling again, and the fundamental infrastructure of our economy, including the port, rail network and regional airport, are experiencing welcome growth.

You can see the rebound all around.

There was the news this week of \$84 million in public and private investment for Port Saint John and upgrades to the New Brunswick Southern Railway – a resounding reflection of the confidence in our region as a hub for trade and commerce.

A few weeks ago, the port welcomed its first cruise passengers in 30 months. Nearly 70 cruise ships will visit before the year is over, and the cruise industry represents just a fraction of the business the port will conduct in 2022.

The port's cargo tonnage is set to double with a new northern European route added by German shipping line Hapag-Lloyd. By next year, the \$205 million modernization of the west side port will be completed, enabling Saint John to accommodate much larger vessels and substantially more cargo.

And now with this week's announcement, the Port's capacity expands significantly again – by more than two and half times that the modernization is ushering in. That's a massive expansion for our port.

The investments in the port and New Brunswick Southern Railway build on some incredible momentum in growing the region's might as a trade hub. Thanks to the purchase of Central Maine & Quebec Railway by Canadian Pacific Rail, Saint John is now connected to major cities in the American Midwest and central Canada. The city's rapid rail access to major markets is what enticed Hapag-Lloyd to double its ship traffic to Port Saint John, and more shipping lines will surely follow.

That news of investments by the federal and provincial governments and J.D. Irving Limited came just a day after the State of the City event hosted by the Saint John Region Chamber – a sold-out event that pulsed with optimism for the future.

As we listened to Mayor Donna Noade Reardon's address, the optimism underscored for me and so many others the sense that we're emerging from these last two years with strength, confidence and determination.

You can see this welcome revival in the Saint John Airport (YSJ), which continues to grow and attract new airlines, with direct flights to Toronto now available for as little as \$59.

Our Chamber has supported and lobbied for these developments to ensure our regional economy turned the corner.

The past two years have demonstrated that the business community of our region is innovative, resilient and persuasive. Our members survived the pandemic because they pivoted to new ways of doing things and while we helped persuade legislators that innovative policies would be required to keep the economy moving. We were pleased to be able to amplify our members' voices and raise their concerns and constructive suggestions directly with the government.

We successfully lobbied for higher wage subsidies and operations funding to help businesses and employees weather the downturn in the economy.

We also successfully pressed to keep the Department of Health's COVID testing program going, enabling businesses to remain open and provide a safe environment for employees and the public. In Saint John alone, we have helped more than 1,000 companies through our test kit distribution centre. This centre continues to operate, and businesses continue to use it. As long as our members continue to believe a significant need exists, we will continue to work with others in the community to address it.

Our Lift Up Local Campaigns were very successful throughout the region and helped to motivate consumers to support our local businesses. We were fortunate to attract government funding to help with this and many of our other initiatives.

The revving up of our regional economy coming out of the pandemic is most welcome. At the same time, we recognize that some businesses are still struggling and we must do all we can to help them emerge with strength as well.

*David Duplisea is chief executive officer of the Saint John Region Chamber of Commerce. His commentary appears monthly.*