

Seizing opportunities for a strong energy future

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Commentary

There is no question that energy costs and inflationary pressures top the list of concerns for businesses in the Saint John region today.

We're not alone: the same pressures are being felt across Canada.

But our region is poised to do something significant and positive in the face of the current energy angst.

This is a generational opportunity for us, because changing energy markets have the potential to unlock the value in local assets to the benefit of our region, our province and our country.

Our success in developing energy here is a product of our region's long history of economic development through innovation.

Our businesses have had both the foresight and ingenuity to meet the energy demands of the future before, in equally tumultuous times, and we know we can do it again with the right investments.

Just one example: A century ago, Saint Johners were debating the merits of different approaches to generating and regulating electricity. They fought two back-to-back elections over the issue, and the model they settled on grew into Saint John Energy, a publicly owned company that has grown into one of the most innovative public utilities in Canada.

Thanks to Saint John Energy, we enjoy power rates about 10 per cent lower than those offered in any other community in New Brunswick. Through its smart grid initiatives, high-capacity energy storage and the Burchill Wind Project currently under construction, Saint John Energy is continuing to position us at the forefront of affordable and sustainable energy.

Global energy markets are once again undergoing a seismic shift, a change so great that it is comparable to the switch from coal-fired steam power to oil and gas and electricity that our great-grandparents experienced.

Our region's businesses want to be at the leading edge of exploiting this emerging economic opportunity, because we know we can succeed.

Today, the future of competitive global businesses lies in developing and delivering cleaner energy sources, and we appreciate that the best way to get there is to invest in a diversity of new energy technologies while making the most of existing energy assets.

The value proposition of these existing technologies will continue to rise as climate change and the conflict in Ukraine disrupt traditional energy supplies and lead to spikes in energy pricing.

This has created new opportunities as well as new challenges. We have seen:

- A resurgence of interest in expanding New Brunswick's electrical grid connections with Quebec and Nova Scotia to facilitate the movement of clean hydroelectric power through the Atlantic Loop.
- The renewal of the Point Lepreau nuclear power plant's operating licence and the development of small modular nuclear reactors right here in our region by Moltex and ARC Clean Energy.
- Premier Blaine Higgs pondering the potential for re-opening New Brunswick's potash mines and re-launching the province's natural gas exploration, both of which would be a boon for southern New Brunswick and the Saint John region in particular because of the anticipated increase in port and rail traffic.
- Amid national and international interest, the potential for the export of LNG from Saint John. Repsol, the owner of the Saint John LNG terminal, affirms that it is continuously seeking new ways to increase the value and impact of its operations in New Brunswick, including the possibility of adding gas liquefaction capabilities to enable the export of liquefied gas as long as a strong business case exists to do so.
- Irving Oil Limited announcing the purchase of a five-megawatt electrolyzer that will crack water into hydrogen fuel and oxygen using sustainably sourced electricity. Its Saint John refinery is the first in Canada to make an investment in clean hydrogen production.

Each of these exciting possibilities represent opportunities to build an energy future that is positive not only for our region but for our province and our nation.

None can be accomplished overnight, or without significant private or public investment. But significant potential for new economic growth seems to exist in each of these areas, and it should be explored.

The past has proven that investments in our region that support energy diversity and price stability for businesses will pay off for all of New Brunswick through increased economic activity.

We have what it takes to build on our successes in energy development. We have the assets, the talent and the know-how. Now is the time to shape our own energy future and grow our economy at the same time.

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