

Strong businesses lead to strong communities.

DAVID DUPLISEA

COMMENTARY

Check out any public forum in New Brunswick these days, and you're likely to see passionate discussion of at least one of three issues: health care, education, and housing. Often, you'll see people debating all three.

Each of these issues has a profound impact upon quality of life in our community. Could greater business development be part of the solution?

Consider the conversations taking place here in the Saint John region:

People of all ages and from all walks of life are saying they want a health-care system that is accessible and responsive to the needs of patients.

People want educational programs that give students the skills they need to succeed in the workplace and build rewarding careers.

People want a housing market that offers citizens at every economic level the opportunity to live safely and affordably.

We need to be wary of the fallacy that corporations are not paying their share. Businesses play a significant role in addressing these issues, and not only through taxation but through direct support and involvement.

Businesses play a vital role in building stronger communities in our region and our province. If we don't understand how interconnected business development and community development are, we risk making policy missteps that could set our communities back decades. A strong business sector and environment result in a stronger social safety net.

We should start by acknowledging that businesses make a substantial contribution to quality of life in the community in a number of different ways, including employment, development, corporate sponsorship in sports and the arts, and philanthropy.

In addition to the taxes they pay, local businesses and corporations are often first in line to fundraise for improvements in health care, education, and housing. I am grateful to all the businesses in our region for their many contributions to the social and philanthropic fabric of our communities.

Our businesses also amplify local calls to action at the provincial and federal levels, joining in common cause with other community members to ensure that issues in our region are addressed.

It is easy to take these contributions for granted, but it would be a mistake to think that businesses only contribute to community quality of life through the taxes they pay, or that they have an infinite capacity to withstand tax increases.

Saint John is a perfect illustration of where such dangerously flawed thinking can lead. Until recently, the Port City had the highest municipal tax rates in the province – and, over time, it has paid the price in lost opportunities.

Saint John has seen much of its tax base and population relocate to other, less heavily taxed communities over the last 30 years, surrendering its position as New Brunswick's largest city and primary centre for business development. The same negative trends will occur on a much larger scale if taxes on businesses and industrial properties are raised. So the starting point for any discussion of how to improve health care, education and housing should be an awareness that businesses are already paying their share.

I think the second truth we need to acknowledge is that quality of life is essential to attract new investment, new residents and new growth to our communities. To achieve greater quality of life, governments must prioritize and invest strategically using the taxes they already collect.

Think of your own family and what determines where you want to live. Affordable housing, quick access to effective medical care and schools that equip students to succeed are selling points for individuals, families and businesses. Strategic and sustained public investments in these areas will draw new employers, employees and immigrants to our region, strengthen the ability of existing businesses to attract new employees, and significantly improve quality of life for individuals and families.

Thanks to two years of record budget surpluses, driven largely by growth in corporate taxes, New Brunswick is in an ideal position to make strategic investments in health care, education and housing that improve community quality of life. But how do we decide what strategic investments are needed, and how can we measure what the impact will be?

Well, frankly, this is an area where our region of the province has a significant advantage.

More than a decade ago, the business community, non-profit sector, and provincial and federal governments committed to a structured, community-wide conversation on economic growth and quality of life in Greater Saint John. In order to prepare for growth, this initiative articulated a strategy and defined infrastructure and other requirements that would enable and accommodate this anticipated growth.

This initiative was called the Benefits Blueprint, and one of its objectives was to map out the gains that could be made in health care, education, housing, immigration, culture, and the arts by harnessing the transformative power of business growth.

Our economic circumstances are not the same as they were in 2008, when the Benefits Blueprint was launched, but that historic initiative set some important precedents.

The Benefits Blueprint process demonstrated that we can all work together toward the common goal of building a community that serves its residents better. And it showed that when we pool our knowledge, we wind up with a more informed conversation about what our community's needs are and how to meet them.

We could use a conversation like that today.

New Brunswick cannot have healthy, prosperous, and liveable communities without successful businesses to generate employment, commerce and taxation; and we can't grow or attract successful businesses without healthy, prosperous, liveable communities and competitive tax rates.

It's that simple. Let's start talking about how to rebalance the equation in ways that generate a higher quality of life at the community level while fostering economic growth.

David Duplisea is Chief Executive Officer of the Saint John Region Chamber of Commerce. His commentary appears monthly.