



SAINT JOHN REGION

**THE CHAMBER**

CHAMPIONS FOR BUSINESS

## **Focus on people to fuel prosperity!**

David Duplisea, Commentary

Like many people who attended Saint John's recent State of the City address, I was blown away by the volume and scope of positive developments mentioned in relation to our region.

I think it's worth recapping the high points, because they illustrate where growth is occurring in our region and what we need to accomplish to keep these positive trends growing.

It all boils down to one key concept: We need to keep the focus on attracting and keeping skilled people.

The biggest news story across our region in 2022 was population growth. Our Greater Saint John Region welcomed 2,861 new residents, while Saint John's population grew by 1,759 people (2.4 per cent) and reached a population of 73,611.

To put that in perspective, the City of Saint John beat its settlement target for the year by nearly 59 per cent. UNB Saint John, which had hoped to attract 17 per cent of its student body from international markets, wound up attracting 20.6 per cent.

This information that Mayor Donna Noade Reardon shared in her address clearly indicates that Saint John has become a destination city, a place where people from across Canada and around the world want to live and work. The challenge ahead is, how do we keep these new residents? How do we continue the trend of growth?

It might help if we understood who is coming here and why. Two-thirds of interprovincial migrants to Greater Saint John in 2022 and 85 per cent of newcomers were under the age of 40. The median age of our region actually decreased by a year and a half last year as more young families, couples and singles moved in.

Our region is becoming known as a place where ambitious, working people can build fulfilling lives for themselves and their children. This is a trend our region can build upon, if we keep the focus on what people in this demographic need and want.

They want to participate in a dynamic economy – and all the indications are there that our region qualifies.

We have seen phenomenal growth in our port, with new global shipping lines and the addition of new cranes increasing the volume of cargo that can be moved. Many of our local companies like JD Irving Limited, Cooke Aquaculture, Irving Oil, NB Southern Railway and the myriad of small and medium sized businesses all are contributors to, and supporters of this growth.

We've seen significant growth in rail traffic and the size of our rail hub, which now serves three class 1 railways – CN, CP, and CSX – with the capacity to move goods efficiently to or from anywhere on the continent. We're starting to see a corresponding impact in the development of Saint John Airport, which is considering developing 450 acres of land into a logistics park.

Our two post-secondary educational institutions, UNB Saint John and NBCC Saint John, are pursuing growth strategies that align with the larger economy in areas such as health care, digital technology, and industrial trades education – all of which will put our region at the forefront of developing the next generation of skilled workers and entrepreneurs.

And then there's sustainable energy, from wind power and smart electrical grid development to next-generation public transit options and alternative energy sources such as small modular nuclear reactors. This is also an area where our region is gaining a national and global reputation for innovation that is attractive to prospective residents.

In addition, our way of life and the many examples of attributes that attract the creative class are here in abundance.

So what do we need to build on these economic advantages, ensuring that our region continues to grow?

Many of the answers were there in the State of the City address. Let's look at the big picture.

We need to build a policy environment that contributes to more liveable communities. That means abundant housing for people at all economic levels. It means access to childcare, and sustainable public transit, and investing in accessible and inclusive recreational spaces – all priorities that the City is pursuing in partnership with other levels of government.

We need to build a policy environment that contributes to business growth by reducing red tape, as the City of Saint John has done with its One Stop Shop for property development and building permits. We need a fair and efficient tax system that maximizes value while minimizing costs – one that recognizes the many contributions made by businesses and which enables businesses and families to thrive.

We need a commitment to collaboration across our region, between businesses and academia and government and between local, provincial and national governments to ensure policy decisions are well informed and everyone is working constructively toward the same objectives.

Our region is on the right trajectory for continuing growth. We just need to stay focused on the objective. People are drawn by opportunities, and communities and economic development depend upon attracting and retaining people. If we keep the focus on people, our region will grow and prosper.

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