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**Reflecting on the successes and challenges of 2023**

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COMMENTARY

The holiday season is reaching its peak, and 2024 is on the horizon. What a year this has been for our region.

In 2023, residents and communities across Greater Saint John seemed to realize that we need to pull together to address major issues that are impacting quality of life and economic growth – and pull together we have. As a result, our population has continued to grow, and an increasing number of new business startups in our region are attributable to investments made by newcomers.

This is progress – and it bodes well for the year to come.

The support that people have shown for local businesses during this period of economic recovery is encouraging. Buying locally strengthens the small- to medium-sized businesses that are the backbone of our economy. More consumers are making the decision to support businesses close to home, and I hope shoppers across our region will continue to buy local this holiday season and in the year ahead.

I am also encouraged by how much the local business community continues to invest back into our region by lobbying for changes to federal, provincial and corporate policies that will benefit all residents. We are proud to be part of this process at the Saint John Region Chamber of Commerce.

Over the past year, our members have joined their voices with those of residents, local governments, community organizations and chambers of commerce in the province.

We’ve called on the federal and provincial governments to devise more effective policy in areas such as housing and homelessness, community mental health, education and trades development, transportation and sustainable energy because these are make-or-break issues with the capacity to accelerate or obstruct community growth.

There seems to be a growing public understanding that giving our children a future here and attracting new employers, investors and skilled employees will require changes.

Legislated employment standards, better access to housing, health care and day care, reliable and renewable sources of energy, easy transportation to and from other Canadian markets – these are essential elements in a strong and dynamic economy.

The events of the past few months suggest that when the people of our region speak with one voice on issues such as these, our voice is more likely to be heard.

Because you supported the Saint John Region Chamber of Commerce when we spoke out about air service in 2023, Air Canada has begun re-offering more flights from our airport to major Canadian business centres.

Because you supported us when we spoke out about ferry service, Transport Canada has agreed not to redeploy the MV Fundy Rose from the Saint John-to-Digby run to a run in Prince Edward Island.

Because you supported us when we spoke out on social issues, a range of potential solutions in housing, homelessness and community mental health are now under consideration by various levels of government.

A community whose citizens speak with one voice has more power – and while there are significant challenges ahead, from strengthening the labour force to slowing inflation, I believe the successes of the past year are reason enough to be optimistic.

Our region has been defined by determination, innovation and entrepreneurialism for more than 235 years. As long as we continue to work together in good faith toward common objectives, we will continue to grow in population and economic prosperity.

On behalf of all of us at the Saint John Region Chamber of Commerce, I’d like to wish everyone happy holidays and a joyous new year, as we continue our work to make the Saint John region stronger in 2024 and beyond. I know our many member businesses are looking forward to making more progress in the new year, with the support of the public they serve.

*Carole Cunningham is Interim Chief Executive Officer of the Saint John Region Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber's commentary appears monthly.*