



Remarks to Saint John Rotary – April 14, 2008

Good Afternoon Everyone, and thank you for inviting me to speak at this luncheon.

When I was approached to do this, I was immediately intrigued at the possibility of speaking to such a prolific group of volunteers. I am, quite simply, honored to be in your presence, and I thank you sincerely for the invitation.

Today, I want to take the opportunity to do at least two things.

First, and of course, I want to bring greetings on behalf of the Board of Trade and let you know some of the things we are working on.

Also, as this will consist of one of my last public appearances as the Chair of the Board of Trade, I will take the liberty of highlighting some wins, and some concerns, about the events of the last year.

Finally, and time permitting, I hope to share just a few of my personal experiences as Chair of the Board of Trade.

Growth

There can be no question that Saint John is a region on the move. If it's been said once, it's been said a thousand times: we are on the cusp of some tremendous economic growth. We are awash in mega-projects - either underway or on the books.

Within this climate of growth, the Board of Trade continued to lobby on a number of key issues.

In the past year, we have fought for (and won) commitments on significant transportation infrastructure (One Mile Interchange and the twinning of Highway #1 from Pennfield to Lepreau). We have embraced strategic energy projects. We have advocated strongly for our university and our community college. We have fought for our local hospitals. We have lobbied for better immigration initiatives and workforce expansion. We have taken our message and lobby initiatives all the way to the National Chamber meetings in Markham, Ontario. We participated in pre-budget consultations with our federal Finance Minister.

And at every step along the way, we asked ourselves what more could be done to advocate for our members, and by extension I suppose, many of the citizens of this city.

We have celebrated our wins and have taken a few punches along the way. As it turns out, not everyone likes what it is we have to say.

But being of influence doesn't always translate into being liked.

And being a lawyer – a frequently maligned profession – it turns out I was a natural fit for a volunteer position that required someone with a thick skin and a drive to succeed.

In that respect, at least, it was certainly my privilege to serve.

And so in the coming year, we will turn our attention to the condition of our industrial parks. We started this initiative several years ago, and as it turns out, it has teeth. The recent Benefits Blueprint document largely embraced the need for industrial land readiness.

We will also be supporting workforce expansion, and we will lobby our new municipal government for a long-overdue Municipal Urban Plan. Both these initiatives will go a long way towards attracting positive development to the city.

And if anyone thought the City of Saint John was the underdog in the past – it's not anymore.

Leading economists have said that Saint John is the fastest growing metropolitan area in the east. And we have the numbers to prove it.

We have a record low unemployment rate in this region. Some folks have been heard to say that this means that “everyone who wants a job, has a job”. Of course, we know that's not true.

Suffice to say that with this growth comes great responsibility, and I find myself wondering not only if we will be ready, but if we will be permitted to come aboard this period of growth in a way that protects this city's most valuable asset – its citizens.

Benefits Optimization Blueprint

To become the next Fort McMurray story, all this city has to do is stand back and do nothing.

There should be no doubt in anyone's mind that our provincial government will be embracing the opportunity for energy projects in this region.

These projects and their spin-offs will generate tax revenue in the billions, something that I would suggest to you will be too attractive to pass up.

To quote the findings from the recent Benefits Blueprint report,

“Growth... is not just something we are chasing, it is real and it is here. More growth looks likely to happen... enough that it may profoundly alter our province's economy and, potentially, our society.”

Growth that stands to profoundly alter our society – and by extension this city – cannot be underestimated.

And it will happen one of two ways.

On the one hand, it will happen

- in a socially responsible way
- that enhances growth opportunities
- while mitigating the risks
- and fairly distributing the benefits.

On the other hand, we could end up with:

- a huge influx of population
- consisting largely of a transient workforce,
- no hospital capacity,
- a doctor shortage,
- an over-burdened police force,
- increased poverty,
- unaffordable housing and increased homelessness,
- and a community built of citizens that are either very, very rich or very, very poor.

Already, one in three children in our community is living and struggling in poverty.

So the incentive to do it right is definitely there.

Will It Happen As It Should?

If you've read even one newspaper from this region in the past two weeks, you know a little about the Benefits Blueprint. It's a consultant report that provides us with an analysis of everything we will need to handle the upcoming period of tremendous growth in our region.

And the numbers are staggering.

In the next 20 years, Saint John's population will double.

The families joining our community will need homes, schools, hospital beds, family doctors and recreational facilities.

And the companies that will drive the energy projects will need a trained and educated workforce.

The estimated tax profit from this growth? A staggering **\$14 billion**.

The cost of avoiding another Fort McMurray? An equally staggering \$1.9 billion.

Will our government have the foresight to spend that much to do it right? Can we be creative in financing these initiatives, starting right now?

We don't yet know what direction the provincial government will be taking us in. But if the agenda to self-sufficiency is truly a key priority, it will happen largely as a result of the economic spinoffs from this region's energy projects. Therefore, the government's agenda towards this region is going to have to change.

Post-Secondary Education

For the 2nd year in a row, our provincial budget has not included funds for:

- the expansion of trades;
- reconstruction of Community Colleges, or
- the creation of an Anglophone medical school.

These decisions have paved the way for uncertainty around our ability to increase immigration, workforce expansion, and the repatriation of those who have already left.

And then there is UNBSJ.

This past year, we have watched this community rally around its university in a show of unequivocal public support.

And it is not undeserved.

UNBSJ has grown to surpass both St. Thomas and Mount Allison in student population, yet it continues to be saddled with an archaic funding model that treats it like a satellite campus instead of its own institution.

We sincerely hope our provincial government will show leadership on this issue in the coming months.

As for its curriculum and programming, the real future our university is still unclear.

It is reassuring that the Benefits Blueprint report calls for key university programs that complement the energy and construction sectors. But our university is equal to much more than that.

UNBSJ can indeed be a Centre of Excellence for applied courses. It should also include full-access to a four-year business and liberal arts education.

As the provincial government moves forward with its reform initiatives, we would do well to ensure that Saint John maintains its access to a quality post-secondary education in many sectors other than just energy.

The wealth that will flow into this region, and the provincial coffers, should be more than enough to justify building capacity at UNBSJ for the years to come.

The Medical School

Most recently, we received word that our provincial government would not fund the construction of the \$24 million building required to house our new medical education program. This news came at the 11th hour, with the deadline for getting the program underway a mere few weeks from now.

It would be easy to wallow in the frustration that this situation has generated, but there is much to be done if we are to salvage this important program.

I have no words to describe to you the tremendous volunteer time that have been dedicated to establishing an Anglophone medical school in N.B.

And this project could not be more important than it is right now.

You see, the recent provincial budget committed resources for 40 new doctors in the next four years for the entire province. But our physician workforce is actually aging at a rate that will require closer to 100 new doctors in this region alone, not to mention the rest of the province.

So we need 100 doctors and get less than 40. If we kept growing our population and if we welcome a huge labour force into the city for energy projects, it will not be long before many of us are facing a physician shortage of epic proportion.

And by the time that happens, it will be too late to do anything meaningful about it.

We are not the only ones that think so.

The Benefits Blueprint report supports both:

- an upgrade of our Regional Hospital, and
- a medical school at UNBSJ.

What better way could there be to jumpstart the Blueprint initiative than to fully invest in the medical school program.

And perhaps the bigger question is this: if we can't afford to build the medical school, can we afford to adopt all of the recommendations in the Benefits Blueprint? Or will some things have to be traded off?

New Health Plan

Closely related to the issue of the new medical school is the provincial government's new Health Plan.

Nearly two months ago, the provincial government turned our eight regional health authorities into two. I should declare that I have more than the average person's knowledge and understanding of this issue. In my professional life as a lawyer, I have spent the last 14 years working alongside physicians and hospitals. I am intimately familiar with the challenges faced by our health care system.

I know that this story really does not resonate with the average Saint John resident. It is hard to imagine how a simple, boring corporate restructuring would directly impact the day-to-day delivery of health care to any one of us individually.

But what if I told you that senior managers in local hospitals throughout the province have been given their working notice – effectively fired from their current positions – with no mention of any place for them in the new governance model? A number of these folks are seasoned, talented physicians. Can we really afford to lose them?

The new Regional Health Authority B does not yet have a new governance model. By all appearances, the corporate shake-up occurred from the top down without any new plan to put in its place.

From a business perspective, you could compare this process to the countless other corporate reorganizations that have happened all over the civilized world. I dare say it wouldn't measure up.

Our local hospital CEO now has no real autonomy to make any real decisions, and our hospital board has been summarily dissolved. No longer is there any real opportunity for community participation in local health care.

This is not without significance. So if I leave you with anything, let it be this.

Our local hospital CEO and volunteer board were instrumental in the creation of trauma system, the medical school, and the piloting of electronic medical records in this region. Local input into health care does have real rewards.

Without a board, our hospital and trauma center accreditation is on hold. So is the implementation of the new trauma system.

This means that ambulances are still being dispatched to the patients that need them, but these patients may not necessarily be taken to the hospital best-equipped to treat their injuries.

And finally, I know for a fact that highly-skilled, local physicians are exploring their options in other jurisdictions.

We have requested meetings, and we continue to lobby our government to roll out this plan more rapidly, hopefully before the summer is upon us.

Real Debate

I will end my remarks by telling you that I've recently become a bit of a Legislature junkie.

Some of you may not know this, but in New Brunswick you can subscribe to a document called Hansard. It amounts effectively to a transcript of the debate and question periods held in our provincial legislature.

Every single last word is recorded for posterity.

I will grant you that it is not easy to be the leader of a house or a political party that is engaging in real debate of significant issues.

After reading thousands of pages of Hansard and tracking the debate around health, energy and post-secondary education, I remain concerned that the true issues – the human faces and stories attached to major reform – will never be heard.

And I am quite confident that the debate will never be elevated to its highest form as long as our politicians are calling each other lazy and self-interested.

Now is the time for thoughtful, intelligent debate on some very major issues. And so I close my remarks with a cloak of sincere concern for both this city and this region.

I remain hopeful that the intense work surrounding the Benefits Blueprint will result both in prosperity for the major corporate partners it embraces, and in real quality of life for the citizens it seeks to protect.

We must call on our political leaders to inspire confidence in the decisions that are being made.

And the citizens of this city must seek to maintain local autonomy over our most prized and coveted assets.

We can and should have real input in what happens in our backyard.