

Building relationships key to accessing new markets

'Atlantica' will forge better relationship between Atlantic Provinces, Eastern New England

By Tom Mason
Contributing Writer

In November 2004, a group of business people from both sides of the Canada/U.S. border sat down in Saint John, New Brunswick to formally establish a new economic region.

It was time, they agreed, that Atlantic Canada businesses reach out to their counterparts in Maine and Eastern New England, to start re forging the ties that had been broken since Confederation.

The new region would encompass the four Atlantic Provinces, part or all of six U.S. states and the part of Quebec on the eastern side of the St. Lawrence River. It would be known as Atlantica.

The participants, who included Atlantic Institute for Market Studies (AIMS) president, Brian Lee Crowley, and Atlantic Provinces Chamber of Commerce president Dianne Kelderman, came up with a slogan at that meeting — "two nations, one region" — and chose Progress Magazine publisher and chair of the Greater Halifax Partnership, Neville Gilfoy, and Eastern Maine Development Corporation president, Jonathan Daniels, as co-chairs.

They also discussed ways of making the Canada/U.S. border more invisible, in order to turn Eastern New England and the Atlantic Provinces into one seamless market with eight million customers.

"I've always believed that the two regions were mirror images of each other," says Gilfoy. "We have a shared history that was prosperous, entrepreneurial and global in its outlook. We need to revive that."

Daniels says that a few years ago, most businesses in his state would never have considered looking at partnerships north of the border, or even in other parts of Maine for that matter.

"We used to go into neighbouring communities poaching business," Daniels says. "Corporate raiding was seen as the way to go. Now we realize that if we can strengthen business in Atlantic Canada, we will see improvements in business in Eastern Maine as well. By developing Atlantica we're working toward that goal."

Atlantica will make cities in Atlantic Canada that have traditionally competed against each other learn to work together as allies, says Gilfoy.

"It's important to realize we are not competing with Saint John or Bangor for business," Gilfoy says. "We're all competing against New York, Toronto, Montreal, Hamilton."

At the same time, business people need to stop thinking of the Canada/U.S.



Ron Garnett

Halifax sits at the point where three of the world's great trade routes converge: the north-south route between Canada and the United States, the route that connects Europe to North America and the Suez Express Route that moves massive quantities of trade goods from Asia to North America.

border as a barrier, says Gilfoy.

"Business people in Moncton don't think twice about doing business with people in Dieppe," he says. "We have to create that same mindset between Halifax and Bangor, between Edmonston and Waterville, Maine."

When political borders were drawn hundreds of years ago, Maine became a peninsula, nearly surrounded by Canada and the Atlantic Ocean. In turn, the state became a barrier to Atlantic Canada, separating the region from the rest of Canada. As rail and road connections were laid down, they followed the convoluted routes of political boundaries instead of the natural, direct routes dictated by trade.

Atlantica is a way to finally turn geography in our favour, says Gilfoy. Ultimately, the trade zone will be much more than an amalgamation of states and provinces doing business with each other. Atlantica, and its major port at Halifax, is the gateway to North America and the region is the connecting point of the world's three great trading blocks. That's because Halifax sits at the point where three of the world's great trade routes converge: the north-south route between Canada and the United States, the route that connects Europe to North America and the Suez Express Route that moves massive quantities of trade goods

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If Halifax is the gateway to Atlantica, then Buffalo, New York — the second busiest port of entry in the United States — is its natural distribution hub. Gilfoy says that the Port of Halifax is perfectly positioned to be the port of entry for Buffalo and upstate New York.

"Now we need to develop a trade corridor between the two cities," he says.

Business people and politicians in Buffalo are enthusiastic about the idea. Recent meetings in that city to promote Atlantica have been extremely well attended.

David Gough sees a market beyond Atlantica when he looks to the United States. Gough is president of GINI University Services Inc., a Dalhousie University-based company that undertakes collaborative information technology research and development with the private and public sectors. He has also worked for 10 years to forge stronger ties between Washington, D.C. and Halifax.

Gough says the U.S. market is huge and no one is in a better position to take advantage of it than Atlantic Canadians.

"The eastern seaboard of North America has a hundred million people," says Gough. "The region is filled with prospects and they are a lot closer to us than China or Germany."

"Nova Scotia and Halifax have an excellent relationship with the United States that has been well established over the last 200 years. The thing we need to do now is to start building on those relationships more effectively, to generate more business and wealth in this region."

In fact, Atlantica is just the latest in a long line of partnerships that Greater

Halifax has established. The Halifax-Moncton Growth Corridor is a business amalgamation that joins those two municipalities with communities like Truro, Amherst and Sackville, New Brunswick. Halifax serves as the port of entry with Moncton functioning as a transportation hub; the highway that connects the two is the main transportation corridor in the Maritimes. And Greater Halifax is one of 14 members of the World Energy Cities Partnership, an organization of cities at the forefront of the energy industry that includes Aberdeen, Houston, Rio de Janeiro and Perth.

Stephen Dempsey, president and CEO of the Greater Halifax Partnership, predicts that the day will come when Atlantica will compete in the global marketplace with other North American trading blocks like the Windsor-Quebec Corridor and the New Atlantic Triangle that encompasses New York City and Boston. The big step now is for business people in the region to find common ground.

"There are differences in doing business in Atlantic Canada and Maine to be sure," he says, "differences in regulations, things like that. But there are many similarities as well. We need to keep working toward a transparent border so we can build on those similarities."

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