



A business event series presented by the Greater Halifax Partnership and The Chronicle Herald



Joseph Robichaud Photography

When the Halifax Regional Municipality partners with other urban centres in the Atlantic region, HRM has a lot to offer in terms of leadership, infrastructure and economic strength.

Federal urban agenda sparks new spirit of cooperation

By Tom Mason

Prime Minister Paul Martin didn't waste any time tackling one of the major challenges that is impacting economic growth in Canada. In his government's first Speech from the Throne last month, Martin announced the creation of a new urban agenda that will assist Canadian cities to develop infrastructure and deal with the problems associated with rapid urban growth.

The urban agenda recognizes the fact that cities in Canada need more revenue to grow and build infrastructure — income from sources like property taxes and parking fines are not enough. It also recognizes that major cities in Canada are the key driver of our country's economy.

Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) Mayor Peter Kelly has been calling for a federal-urban agenda for some time. Shortly after his term of office began, Kelly joined with other Canadian mayors to bring the case for federal support before Ottawa.

"We have such a small population here in Atlantic Canada, we realized a number of years ago that we had to start speaking with a united voice when dealing at the table with Ottawa. The idea of working together to attract business came from that," he says.

To foster that spirit of cooperation and gain stronger leverage in the national debate on urban issues, Kelly and other mayors around the region started the Atlantic Mayors Congress in 2001. Other groups that the HRM is a part of include the Federation of Canadian Municipalities Big City Mayors Caucus which includes the 22 largest cities in the country, and the Hub City Mayors representing the 10 major urban centres in Canada. Mayor Kelly is also the current chairman of the World Energy Cities Partnership, an amalgamation of cities around the world whose economies hinge on the oil and gas industry.

The mayor's initiative helped spark a new spirit of cooperation among Atlantic Canada's urban centres. In recent years, places like HRM, St. John's, Saint John and Moncton have dropped the outdated idea that they must compete with each other for new business and development opportunities. More and more, these

regional centres are learning ways to work together on common goals, strengthening the region's economic prospects in the process.

It's hardly a new idea. Combining assets to create a consortium that is stronger than the sum of its parts is something that big business has been doing for a long time. The synergy that ensues gives small companies the power to compete for large contracts that would otherwise be out of their league. But lately, the synergy concept has become a way for cities to compete as well. In places like Ontario and North Carolina, and in what has become a general trend all over North America, cities with resources, infrastructures and geographies that are complementary to each other have been teaming up to attract business for several years now.

"This is not a zero-sum game," says Stephen Dempsey, president of Greater Halifax Partnership. "Teaming up with other cities in the region is a concept that we will all benefit from. Atlantic Canada is so small, we need to work together to be able to compete with larger centres in North America. What we're doing now is capitalizing on that idea."

Enter the Halifax-Moncton Growth Corridor, an amalgamation that joins those two cities with communities like Truro, Amherst and Sackville, N.B. The first piece of the infrastructure puzzle

was laid in place a few years ago with the completion of highway twinning between the two cities. Now Dempsey and other proponents of the idea are trying to get business leaders in Halifax and Moncton to start thinking in broader terms.

"We're even starting to change the language we use when we refer to Moncton. We used to talk about going to Moncton for a trip. Now we talk about going to Moncton for a meeting. We're looking at our neighbours as colleagues rather than adversaries."

Some of the changes brought on by the advent of the Halifax-Moncton Growth Corridor are immediately obvious. The Truro Power Centre is a case in point. Created by the Millbrook First Nation on band-owned land, the Power Centre will include a truck plaza, a retail mall, a state-of-the-art aquaculture facility and greenhouse, a motel, brewery and a Mi'kmaq heritage centre when it is fully completed — drawing its clientele from the steady stream of highway traffic that passes by every day.

"It's easy to understand how something like the Power Centre benefits from the Halifax-Moncton Growth Corridor concept," says Dempsey. "In order to work, the Power Centre is dependent on a much larger market than Truro can provide. The growth corridor concept helps to provide them with that market." "Moncton was an obvious city to team

up with," says Kelly. "We are the largest urban centre in the region. They are a hub of transportation. The highway that connects us is the main transportation corridor in the Maritimes. By working closely with Moncton to build business opportunities, we can fine-tune our approach and learn to work with other urban centres in our region as well."

To make cooperation possible between HRM and other cities within the Atlantic region, transportation infrastructure must be developed and improved — not an easy task considering the population densities in the region. That project got a big shot in the arm with the prime minister's announcement of the national urban agenda. This will give urban centres across Canada the fiscal resources they need to bring their infrastructures — mass transit, highways and roadways, wastewater treatment and cultural facilities — up to a level needed to compete globally. That influx of cash may be exactly what places like Halifax and Moncton need to become more competitive, says HRM chief administrative officer, George McLellan.

"Urban renewal is absolutely critical for us. Without that being on the federal agenda, we don't have any hope of it being a provincial issue, probably for decades."

Halifax has already done a good job with limited resources when it comes to improving infrastructure, but it still has a

long way to go, says McLellan.

"With the growth of the cities you see some of the emerging issues, such as transportation, have become much more complex as the cities have grown. You get to the point where roads aren't the only solution. You get to the point where roads aren't going to work because of the inherent densities of cities.

"One of the most economical things we can do is to use our geography to our best advantage. We're looking at the harbour, not as something that divides us but as our best highway. That is our easiest way to relate to each other across that harbour. We're looking at multiplying the ferry opportunities around that harbour as a way to move people in an attractive, environmentally friendly and effective way. We're looking at the existing rail infrastructure as well. Our geography is unique here. It gives us an advantage, not a disadvantage."

The bottom line, says McLellan, is that HRM has a lot to offer the region in terms of leadership, infrastructure and economic strength. When the regional municipality partners with other urban centres in the region, that strength will only increase.

"Halifax has a reputation of being one of the best places to live in North America. That's key. When you look at what urban visionary Richard Florida and others have brought to the evolution of cities and how they grow and attract stronger economies, there is a recognition that places that have a lot to offer in a living sense attract business opportunities. Our unique geography, the presence of a good university base, a good health care system and good transportation connections — those things have to be strengthened in order to underscore the quality of life and the excitement we have here."

Dempsey says that many of the business opportunities that the Atlantic region needs to grow are already in place here. Now all that remains is to find ways to capitalize on them.

"Our main competition is ourselves. Eight out of 10 new jobs in Greater Halifax come from companies that are already here in our region. If we can make it easier for a company from Moncton to come to Halifax, then our whole region grows."

Hugh Segal addresses HRM audience

On Wednesday, March 10, the Greater Halifax Partnership and The Chronicle Herald present the first luncheon in the 2004 Building Our Future series, "Excellence, leadership and urban growth — how do they relate?", featuring Hugh Segal, president of the Institute for Research on Public Policy, political strategist, media commentator and author.

A senior fellow at The School of Policy Studies at Queen's University and president of the non-partisan Institute for Research on Public Policy, Mr. Segal combines his years in politics with his decade and a half in the private sector, to bring rare and penetrating insight into our present prospects as a country

and as citizens of the world. Former chief of staff to the prime minister of Canada and associate secretary of the Ontario cabinet, Mr. Segal is one of Canada's best-known public policy experts.

Mr. Segal has been a regular panelist for many programs, including The Editors (PBS) and Pamela Wallin (CBC Newsworld), and a former columnist for The Financial Post and The Toronto Star. In addition, he has authored three books and co-authored two books on politics and public policy.

At the Building Our Future event, Mr. Segal will discuss opportunities and challenges around the federal urban



■ Segal

growth agenda, how others are addressing it, and what we can learn from them. For more information on the event visit www.greaterhalifax.com.



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