



# Journey of discovery

*Paul Kent believes the future of Halifax depends on the success of its small business sector. How best to encourage that groundswell is the focus for the incoming head of the city's development partnership*

**I**n his groundbreaking study of creativity, University of Chicago psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi argued that one hallmark of all creative people is the ability to embrace paradox, to entertain two seemingly opposing views. Such dualities were woven throughout my recent conversation with Paul Kent, the incoming president and CEO of the Greater Halifax Partnership ([www.greaterhalifax.com](http://www.greaterhalifax.com)). As he points out, the Partnership itself is a hybrid: a development agency dependent on collaboration between investors from both the private and public sectors.

Kent appreciates that as a newcomer to the position, he is able to take a fresh look at the organization. "I have the privilege of still having the perspective of an outsider exposed to the inside reality," he says. Kent comes with 30 years of experience at executive levels with large organizations in both the public and private sectors. For the last couple of years he worked as a strategic management consultant, where he gained a new appreciation of small business.

"Through this latest journey of discovery, I realize I've been searching for a job

like this, where I can present the characteristics of a region I love and believe in," says Kent. "I've always had a legitimate interest in where I live, in the economic and social well-being of the place." His greatest strength, in his opinion? "I'm known for my ability to collaborate—to create trust."

Kent has an obvious love of ideas, yet he is practical, an operator who wants results. "I'm frustrated by circular discussions about ideas that aren't implemented," he says. One idea he's currently playing with was presented by economist Jeff Rubin to the Halifax Chamber of Commerce ([www.halifaxchamber.com](http://www.halifaxchamber.com)). Rubin's thesis is that the economic growth of the past century has been fuelled by cheap oil; as oil gets more scarce and expensive, driving up the cost of manufacturing and transportation, we will revert to smaller, more parochial economies.

"Where is the opportunity in this new world, which is terribly small and terribly big at the same time?" asks Kent. The answer, he suggests, comes partly from one's sense of place. He recalls a trip to Asia with Aliant, where their hosts saw Asia as the centre of the world and Canada as a Pacific country, with Halifax a long way away.

"You can spin a globe and make the centre wherever you want," says Kent.

What role will the Partnership play under his stewardship? It has a reputation for doing excellent research, building confidence, and making a difference in immigration. Now it is time to return to core principles, Kent suggests, with a sharper focus on creating a stronger economy. "The challenge is not to be broad and thin but to be focused and potent. The key will be to make an everyday difference to our small and medium-size businesses."

Still, there are macro issues, including the Halifax Gateway Council ([www.halifaxgateway.com](http://www.halifaxgateway.com)), which is managed by the Partnership. "This is an opportunity for the Maritime provinces to look at transportation issues and to present the region as a whole to the global marketplace," says Kent, "instead of our previous fractious approach, where smaller interests prevailed over a strategic long-term view." While geography makes the region a natural transportation hub, it can also be a digital gateway. "We have advanced telecommunications, and a lot of Atlantic data traffic comes through Herring Cove. Let's leverage this natural asset."

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The Greater Halifax Partnership is a Nova Scotia **Come to life** charter member. **Come to life** brings together government, business, and NGOs to tell the world about living, working, visiting, investing, and studying in Nova Scotia. For more information visit [www.novascotialife.com](http://www.novascotialife.com).

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Brand is another theme: How to create one vision for the region as a great place to live and work? “Perceptions depend on context,” says Kent. “To a cruise-ship passenger, Halifax is lovely, quaint, historic. Yet to a businessperson from India, we can be challenging to deal with. We are not seen as being as productive as other places on the globe.”

Kent believes the biggest issue facing the region is demographic change. “We have an aging population that needs more health care resources and young people who want to get out and explore the world. There is a fundamental imbalance.” On the

positive side, education is one of the region’s greatest strengths; a strong university-and-college system helps retain and attract youth. “This is important, because the war for talent is on.”

In Kent’s view, the backbone of our economy is the region’s many small and medium-size businesses. “It’s admirable what they attempt to do day after day. However, at times they need help to get to the next plateau in their growth process, whether it’s accessing capital or mentoring. Our success as a region depends on these companies reaching their growth potential.”

Kent wants the Partnership to become “an aggregator” for small companies. “We should be a grassroots organization where our boardroom is known as a place to come together and make deals. We can generate some noise for these smaller players, get to deals quicker and help them get them funded.” The challenge is to keep the Partnership from becoming bureaucratic as it matures—to present dynamism in the marketplace. Says Kent: “The puzzle is how best to do that—to be an agent of positive outcomes for business and the municipality, and on the social side as well.” — **DAVID HOLT**