

GUEST OPINION

## JIM QUINN: Envision on the right track for Saint John



Sen. Jim Quinn writes: 'Envision Saint John is providing leadership and their progress is impressive.'

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**Sen. Jim Quinn | Commentary**

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I am proud to be a member of the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative (BCAPI), a group who for the past 25 years has worked to reduce poverty in our city. Since joining the group five years ago, I have had the privilege of seeing dedicated people working with businesses, educators and provincial officials on two specific initiatives: the When Children Succeed project for K-2 children in priority neighbourhood schools, and the new elementary school for the south-central area of Saint John.

In 2021, BCAPI received the results of a report examining the current state of poverty in the Saint John area. One of red flags raised by Deloitte's research was that the number of Saint John area youth aged 15-24 who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) is 1 in 7 –

significantly more than the national average of 1 in 11.

That translates to 1,500 young people in our region!

Under the BCAPI banner, I am excited to be a member of a collaborative regional working group of not-for-profit organizations, businesses and other organizations who are dedicating their valuable time to crack this challenging problem. After months of discussion and collaboration, our group developed an overview blueprint of how best to proceed. But in order to move forward, it became obvious that full-time support would be required to coordinate and lead action to achieve the desired result: helping our NEET youth move into training and/or employment to set them on a path for success and build our economy at the same time.

Fortunately, two years ago our regional leaders had the foresight to develop a new model for economic development in our region, and today we have Envision Saint John: The

Regional Growth Agency. Decision makers at that time recognized that this new organization would require an energetic leader who understood that past approaches to economic development were simply not achieving desired results and that new, fresh, collaborative approaches would be required. In my opinion they “hit the ball out of the park” by appointing Paulette Hicks CEO.

Ms. Hicks has been an integral member of our NEET working group and it became clear that Envision Saint John and Ms. Hicks would be the natural focal point to take the work of our group to the next level. I have witnessed first-hand how Ms. Hicks and her team have made real progress activating our plan, working with and co-ordinating the actions of a broad group of participants. This work will result in innovative and accessible new training and development opportunities for members of our NEET community.

As it absolutely must be, in today's world of unfilled jobs, declining workforce numbers, and fierce competition for skilled workers, growing the economy is all about people – retaining them, training them, and attracting them. That's why Envision Saint John has identified building the talent pipeline as a strategic priority.

I am invigorated by this new growth model and pleased to report the effectiveness of our NEET Youth Working Group is just one example of how it is already proving successful.

The team at Envision call themselves facilitators, conveners and accelerators in this multi-faceted talent play. Bottom line, they are actively helping to move things forward. That's probably where their new tagline comes from: always moving forward.

I see them as the team who will front-burner our community's biggest goals, keeping government's eye on the ball, keeping local stakeholders engaged and on-schedule, and removing obstacles when no one else has the time.

It's a critically important role, because as most business leaders and politicians know – most of our days are spent doing and reacting instead of planning and strategizing. Finding the time to drive a complex, multi-stakeholder project with a variety of funding sources across the finish line is almost impossible, and too often important and valuable initiatives are put on the back-burner, where they languish and die.

Envision Saint John's front-burner mentality manifests itself in polite, transparent, but nevertheless relentless drive. And it's working.

Envision Saint John is not chasing incremental growth. It is focused on building a momentum machine that will achieve growth at scale: delivering the big opportunities where impact will be felt by many.

They are showing those who thought they knew what economic development looks like, that it is distinctly different in 2022. Witnessing their approach first-hand is indeed refreshing as it respectfully challenges past practices which often saw opposing views become blockades for moving forward. This caused outside observers and indeed some within our own region to form negative impressions of our area. Not everyone likes change – but we need it, and we need it now!

Envision Saint John is providing leadership and their progress is impressive. This new organization is working with a network of partner organizations to assess the gap between where we are now and where we need to be, build the solutions and connections necessary to bridge the gap, and then deliver on them to close the gap and achieve our goals. It's an agile, iterative process that works at the speed of

change.

I am pleased to be working with so many partners in helping to address important issues in our community, and I am indeed grateful that our past leaders saw the value in establishing a new economic development agency that has been empowered to take new and innovative approaches as they move our economy forward.

Having a team all rowing in the same direction is important, but so too is having our leaders and influencers understanding that their active support is also key to building positive momentum that others will want to repeat.

I am certain you will be hearing more of our NEET initiative and other initiatives as we move forward under Envision's capable leadership.

*Jim Quinn is a senator and former president and CEO of the Saint John Port Authority.*