

Toward Prosperity

Digby County Roundtable

June 19, 2000

Notes:

Assets in Digby County:

- a solid work force
- low land prices
- It is a beautiful corner of Nova Scotia.

Seasonal Employment:

- Some local industries, especially the natural resource based ones, have a critical need for seasonal workers.
- As the economy improves, it gets harder to find seasonal workers - boat builders are using most of the skilled workers in the area.
- More full time continuing jobs are needed. There are mid-level manufacturers in Ontario who would like to come to a place like Digby e.g. a maker of catalytic muffler converters. The area needs year-round activity to produce jobs for young people.
- We need to balance the seasonal work - find links between agricultural, mink and fishery work.
- We need to know each other across the county - identify, use and develop our local skills.
- Should be focusing on doing business locally wherever possible.
- To keep seasonal workers available could we offer portable pensions to them?
- Could employers get together to offer seasonal workers longer periods of steady employment? Example: Mink farming - a \$25 million industry which pays an average of \$9.65/hour (from \$7-14/hour).

Education:

- Digby has low levels of education. We need to provide educational opportunities for our local people.
- Industry needs innovative workers who can read.
- There are few opportunities for low skilled, ill trained workers.
- Those people with education and drive are leaving.

Opportunities:

- We need to know our own opportunities. Western Valley Development Authority (WVDA) winning the **Smart Communities** competition offers opportunities:
- e-commerce was included in the bid.
- Need to develop and train people to handle the internet - need to get e-commerce working for the region.

Value Added:

- We need to process more raw materials locally.

Culture:

- Must develop the culture sector and especially cultural tourism. (\$1 put in can yield \$9). Need to measure the impact of the cultural sector better. Western Valley Development Authority has a Cultural Action Team - we should put it into action. Would a culture sector portal help?
- The World Acadian Congress offers an opportunity (but what is an “Acadian”?).
- Cultural projects offer opportunities but what impresses our communities - people want to see hammers flying, get projects going e.g. call centres.
- A small local call centre (75 seats) could be a county project. Bridgewater has a call centre, who paid for it?
- Gardening - even the rocky little ledges, offers opportunities e.g. the “dealing with the wind” seminar.
- Pride - Acadian and Nova Scotian - is a strength. The community radio station has been a key element. It values our language, allows us to be ourselves.

Transport:

- Low value resources (e.g. fish waste being sold to the United States) have a limited shipping range. Adding value increases the transport range. Process the resources here!
- Service is bad and the margins are too thin to drive around.

Lending:

- Banks do not know our industry e.g. mink: when the markets collapsed, there were problems. Governments should be in there with loans or at least guarantees for sound businesses which cannot get conventional bank financing.
- Properly designed guarantee programs would be a good way to support rural business.
- There is a niche for credit unions in rural lending too. Government should facilitate rural business until the banking system changes to force banks to do more than concentrate on where they can make the most money.
- As businesses expand they cannot get increased operating lines of credit from banks.
- Access and service are also problems.

Venture capital:

- There is money in the region. We need to support business in our communities to help make those communities more sustainable. The Community Economic Development Investment Fund program needs to be used more often.

Forestry:

- There are huge opportunities in sustainable forestry. Nova Scotia is doing the wrong things.
- There could be year-round jobs - like in Sweden - but there are not. The Swedes enforce their guidelines but we do not.

- The region needs funding to support a forestry resource centre. This has been a goal since the days of Community Futures.
- Forestry is an old industry with real potential, but currently is unsustainable and in crisis.
- Clear-cutting on Digby Neck demolishes healthy wood-lots but unhealthy wood remains.
- Clear violations lead to small fines which companies treat as a cost of doing business.
- Forestry is worse today than ten years ago. The opportunities are there e.g. hardwood flooring.
- Sawmills have tripled in size and are sustainable if we manage the resource correctly.
- Over 50% of the forest is owned by individuals and it is hard to organize them.
- Crown land is all falling down. It may be worse than the land in private hands. "The woods are all going down the road."

Role of Government:

- We need more management dollars for the forestry industry.
- Government needs to be more available to rural communities.
- We should put more people in the field to assist with export development. Bring expertise closer to the people. People in Halifax develop a Halifax mind-set and only look after rural areas if they have the time.
- Government cannot solve all problems but it should not be giving incentives to business.
- Payroll rebates seem sensible but keep an eye on the criteria.
- Reducing the taxes on business will stimulate the economy.
- We should be encouraging the potential in the German market because of the number of Germans coming here. What are the barriers to German trade into the United States?
- Ireland developed a social contract involving government/employers/unions. The Irish built industrial parks and filled them with educated Irish. Are there lessons in that experience for Nova Scotia?
- Norway: what can we learn from their approach to development?
- We need to spread the wealth around. Put money into communities. Develop what is there. We do not want a Michelin plant on Brier Island.
- We should reduce the battles with the Department of the Environment.
- Government must help us move beyond backyard industries.
- We need to create rural industrial zones.

Regionalization:

- Regionalization has cost Digby jobs. We now have no power in directing how money on our own resources is spent.
- Truro, Halifax, and Ottawa all tell us what to do in forestry. The same is true in education.
- Jobs are moving to Bridgewater or Yarmouth.
- All the decisions which affect us are made elsewhere.

Strategic directions:

- These need to be sharpened but must not exclude good ideas which fall outside of the strategic

directions.

Training:

- Make changes in training to prepare people to work for themselves or others. Follow the updated Conference Board of Canada's "Employability Skills" report.
- Focus on the early years.
- Know what companies are looking for and meet their needs.

Other Ideas:

- We must remember our historic skills. Keep training in some of the apprenticeable trades. The skills are still in demand.
- We should be facilitating small business growth, especially their access to funds.
- We need to foster an attitude of co-operation not conflict.
- Should have more deals like the Shaw plant.
- Must start looking for the "opportunities" in the present obstacles.
- Need to minimize red tape but regulate well.
- Need to develop a clearer tax framework. Gas tax revenues should go towards road maintenance. Lottery proceeds should go towards Community Economic Development.
- We should be taxing industrial forestry. Need to replant multi-species forests.
- Education and attitudes are key, we should expose young people to good forestry practices.
- We need to concentrate on strategy, not tactics - at least a 10 year vision.
- The economy is actually vibrant here. We are on the cusp of significant economic development.