

N.B. has 'too many jobs, not enough people'™

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Appeared on page A1*

Government must shift some of its funding away from keeping fishery and forestry jobs afloat and instead move towards building opportunities in green energy and manufacturing, says one of the two businessmen tasked with charting the province's economic future.

Francis McGuire and Gilles LePage, co-chairmen of the province's self-sufficiency task force, released their second discussion paper, focusing on reversing the province's labour shortage.

A skilled labour shortage is the biggest challenge facing the province, according to the report, a shift from decades of concern regarding high unemployment rates.

"There are too many jobs and not enough people," McGuire said.

"It is difficult to come to terms with that, given the fact that high unemployment has been a factor in this province for so long and so much public policy has been built around it. But in the future, the question is how do we find people to fill the jobs?"

Premier Shawn Graham has set the goal of New Brunswick becoming economically self-sufficient by 2026.

With a population of about 748,400, the province needs to increase its population by more than 100,000 people over the next 20 years – an increase of about 5,000 people per year, said McGuire.

In order to chart a new economic path, the province must increase exports in all sectors, said McGuire.

Most of the job growth will come from energy, tourism, new "green" technologies, new aquaculture opportunities and call centres, stated McGuire.

Recently announced energy projects for the Saint John area, including a proposed second refinery, will require thousands of skilled workers within the next two years.

As well, an enhanced extra-mural program allowing the province to deliver as many services as possible to patients in their own homes would make New Brunswick a leader in "e-health" with the potential of significant export opportunities and the creation of thousands of high-paying jobs, he added.

"You're going to see, on the other hand, that some of our natural resource areas are going to face challenges," said McGuire. "We believe that you're going to see over the coming years, just through market forces, fewer, but stronger, sawmills and fewer, but stronger, fish processing plants."

For example, the report is suggesting government offer a buy-out package to sawmill owners who voluntarily give up their wood allocation, allowing it to be given to the remaining forestry companies.

The greater wood supply would give the remaining companies more money to modernize their operations and, in turn, increase productivity and wages.

Along the same line, the wages of the thousands of fish processing plant workers, located mainly in the Acadian Peninsula, need to increase dramatically, said McGuire.

The average fish plant worker makes \$12,700 a year, well below the national average income of \$38,000. Industry and government must strive to double the incomes of employees, said McGuire. However that means a significant number of jobs, particularly those with the lowest incomes, will be lost.

Marc Arsenault, president of the New Brunswick Forest Products Association, said he realizes inefficient companies aren't likely to survive.

However government has a role to play in helping companies modernize by eliminating red tape and offering incentives to businesses willing to invest in new technology, he said.

Arsenault said the report raises some concern by suggesting government shouldn't help businesses with the rising cost of energy and instead focus on energy efficiency and green technologies.

Arsenault agreed NB Power needs to act as a business but said industries aren't prepared for rate shock.

However he praised the report's suggestion that the province increase the allowable wood cut by reducing the amount of Crown land set aside for conservation purposes from 30 per cent to 20 per cent.

"We know that we can grow more wood," said Arsenault. "There's no doubt about that. And we can be more efficient, it makes sense."

But for Toby Couture, a researcher with the Conservation Council of New Brunswick, the task force's report doesn't make sense at all.

The task force is seemingly contradicting itself by suggesting self-sufficiency will be achieved by relying on exports, he said.

The report reads like a business plan to benefit large industries at the expense of the environment, said Couture.

"This is not a self-sufficiency strategy," he said. "It's a strategy of self-sacrifice for our province."

Metro residents high on life here

By Aloma Jardine

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Appeared on page A1

Dan and Suzanne Flokstra and their children, Renée, 5, and Graham, 4, moved to Metro Moncton a year ago.

Originally from Edmonton, they had been living in Yellowknife for several years, but wanted a change.

"I didn't even know where Moncton was, but I knew I wanted to get out of Yellowknife and I didn't want to go back to Edmonton," Suzanne Flokstra says. "I didn't want to commute, I wanted to be able to go to work and do things with my kids in a half-hour radius."

Family opinion swung in favour of the Maritimes because so many of their Yellowknife friends were from here.

"We thought if we are not going to go where our family is, we want to go where we think it will be the next best thing to family," Flokstra says.

The pay may be less here, but so is the cost of living, and money, after all, isn't everything.

Flokstra loves the strong sense of community they have found, with people who are happy, friendly, and family-oriented.

A Franco-Albertan, she also welcomes the chance for her children to grow up bilingual.

Newcomers aren't the only ones who appreciate what Metro Moncton has to offer. The recent Times & Transcript commissioned CityThink survey, carried out by Omnifacts Bristol Research last month, found 91 per cent of those polled ranked their quality of life as good or excellent.

At 93 per cent, Dieppe scored best of the three communities, while Riverview had the lowest marks at 90 per cent, however Riverview had the best excellence rating with 36 per cent of those surveyed ranking their quality of life as excellent, compared to 31 per cent in Moncton and 28 per cent in Dieppe.

Few people likely have more experience in using our quality of life as a selling point than Enterprise Greater Moncton CEO John Thompson.

Thompson shares the advantages Metro Moncton offers with potential investors to show the region is able to attract and keep workers here.

Some of Metro's most attractive features include its two hospitals, its cancer research centre, and its education facilities, including two community colleges, two universities, several private institutions, and Mount Allison University just down the road.

Cultural activities like dance and theatre, proximity to natural wonders like Parlee Beach and the Hopewell Rocks, low levels of serious crime, and fresh air also draw people in.

Thompson says the mix of French and English culture is also a selling point, as is the great variety of retail stores.

Good sports and recreation facilities are also important and Metro Monctonians, on the whole, are satisfied with theirs.

Sixty-eight per cent of those polled say Metro Moncton offers excellent facilities.

Ian Fowler, the City of Moncton's general manager of recreation, parks, tourism, and culture, says Moncton has done a lot of work to improve its facilities.

The refurbishment of the Kay Arena gives the city five new arenas, the CN Sportsplex has added 10 baseball and six soccer fields to the city, and the tennis courts at Centennial Park have just been redone.

Fowler says they are continuing to improve infrastructure.

"I think right now we are on a nice momentum swing," he says. "In some areas we are the envy of Atlantic Canada, but in others we are now trying to catch up and maintain the facilities."

Riverview residents were happiest with their leisure infrastructure, with 71 per cent calling their facilities top notch.

Bob Clive, director of parks and recreation for the Town of Riverview, says the town's year-round indoor skate park is the envy of many, its marina provides people with the opportunity to take advantage of the Petitcodiac head pond, and its programming appeals to all age groups.

Clive says new residents are often wowed by what's available.

"We're small, but we've got all of the things people would try to find in a larger centre," he says. "I think it really has an impact on whether people are going to buy here, build here, or stay here."

While people are happy with their facilities, green space is a sore point.

Just 42 per cent of those surveyed strongly felt that their community is committed to maintaining and developing green spaces, down a point from last year's 43 per cent, and the question with the lowest level of satisfaction on the whole survey.

Fowler partially attributes their poor showing to Moncton's controversial decision to sell land that had long been considered part of Mapleton Park and talk of allowing a hotel to be built in part of Riverfront Park.

He says that no doubt had an impact on how people see the city's commitment to green spaces.

But he says communication is also part of the problem.

Fowler says the city has actually put a lot of work into green space in the last year, including constructing a large stretch of the Millennium Trail and improvements to Irish-town Nature Park and Centennial Park.

"I'm not saying people are wrong in saying they want more... but I think we have to educate them more about what they do have," says Moncton Mayor Lorne Mitton. "Irish-town Nature Park is a jewel, there is so much potential there, and Centennial Park and Mapleton Park."

Dieppe Mayor Achille Maillet says his city also took a hit in public opinion when it cut down trees to make way for the new city hall and public plaza.

"I think it is a fair comment to say we have lagged behind over the years because we developed fast and developed a lot, but we are making sure we will protect the green spaces we can and the marsh," he says.

Maillet says the city is working on a green plan and has the first draft done already. It has also been promoting green development for the past several years, linking all neighbourhoods with an extensive trail system and encouraging creative and environmental design in subdivisions like Bonaventure Park.

Riverview also scored low, but Clive says they have several projects in the works that should help rectify that.

He says money has been set aside in 2007 to expand the trail system and the town is about to see a huge addition to its green space.

Once the new east corridor is built, it will give residents access to nearly 300 acres of natural land.

"It is just sitting there waiting. Its potential will be harnessed when that road goes up there," Clive says. "Some of this development is going to break Riverview wide open and the quality of life will get even better than it is now."

Still, people are pretty happy with what they have already. Eighty-one per cent of Metro Monctonians feel this is a great place to raise a family. Dieppe residents were most likely to feel that way with 88 per cent agreement compared to 84 per cent in Riverview and 78 per cent in Moncton.

Maillet isn't surprised his citizens ranked the community highly.

"Certainly here in Dieppe we hear it all the time. The economy is doing very well, we have very low unemployment, we're working hard at marrying the economy and arts and culture and leisure services," he says. "For us, quality of life is at the base."

Perhaps people also feel good about raising their families here because they feel safe in the community.

Seventy-three per cent of those polled said they feel safe in Metro Moncton, up from 64 per cent last year. Only 1 per cent of those polled felt very unsafe.

Codiac Regional RCMP Superintendent Todd Shean says the numbers are encouraging.

"For me, it is validation," he says. "It shows that we are doing the right thing and it is being recognized by the communities."

Shean says Codiac is in its second year of business planning, which has involved consulting with municipal leaders and the public to see what issues they would like police to address, adding more directed enforcement, and the creation of a street crime unit, a motorcycle unit, and a traffic enforcement unit.

Shean says they've also been working hard on communications and making sure citizens know exactly what their local RCMP are doing.