Residents dependent on government

Continued from front

“We are a small province, the money tends to be at the federal and provincial levels, but the need is at the local level.”

While the province focuses on such things as export of goods such as value-added food, and promotion of communications and aerospace industries, local fishermen are typically geared towards attracting retail businesses, expanding the small service sector and other smaller-scale projects.

St. Stephen’s inherent role as a service sector, for example, doesn’t mesh with the general provincial economic development efforts currently underway, efforts aimed at export markets, primarily, Campbell suggested.

He continued the region is too dependent on government income such as pensions, employment insurance and welfare: 22.5 per cent of the area’s income is derived from government sources (not including those who work for various levels of government) which is about half the national average.

Campbell estimated that when provincial and federal employment is factored in, the region is likely 50 per cent dependent on government revenue – it simply isn’t self-sufficient.

Another key obstacle to local growth is a short-age of entrepreneurs in the immediate community.

As an example, Campbell stated, 11 per cent of the national workforce is self-employed, whereas only 5.6 per cent in the St. Stephen area are self-employed, Campbell said.

Another issue is age. The median age of the region is 43, meaning the area needs to import youth from elsewhere, said Campbell, in order to balance room to take action.

There is no reason for economic development to be focused on urban centres, he continued, urging business people gathered for the event to consider innovative ways of attracting something such as IT businesses to the area.

“Mc continuous and detailed to succeed.

For such reasons, the future of the region lies in attracting newcomers to the region. But to do that requires a change in prevailing attitude.

“We are not necessarily comfortable with people from at the local level, but on the other hand, if we want these homes to sell ... We need to bring in people.”

People have to love to live here, he stressed, and if that isn’t a reality, the region will miss out on key marketing and recruitment asset.

Businesses, he said, need to have significant and defined reasons to move, he said, citing St. Stephen’s geographic location – next to the U.S. border, serviced by natural gas, serviced by transportation hubs and featuring spectacular scenery – as particularly attractive, potentially, to external interests. Such assets need to be better marketed.

Future success lies in increased private contributions to economic development initiatives and increased co-operation between area municipalities, said Campbell.

There is no reason for economic development to be focused on urban centres, he continued, urging business people gathered for the event to consider innovative ways of attracting something such as IT businesses to the area.

“This is about re-orienting our thinking,” he said, raising the idea of local groups working with provincial and detailed to succeed.

In a discussion that followed, Campbell responded to a question from David Ganong, the president and CEO of Ganong Bros., on the need for education.

Education, replied Campbell, may be over-rated.

New Brunswick’s university-educated graduates are quite likely to leave the province because the degree doesn’t guarantee a job. That disparity, said Campbell, underscores the need for a greater push to encourage entrepreneurial spirit, to encourage young people to launch businesses themselves and thus create new jobs.

In the end, he issued a challenge to those in the room to take action.

“It’s about embracing change, stepping up to the plate, and making the community better. You don’t want to leave the community worse than your parents did,” Campbell said.