



Vibrant COMMUNITIES Saint John

March 13, 2006

The Honourable Bernard Lord
Premier of New Brunswick
P.O. Box 6000,
Fredericton, N.B. E3B 5H1

Premier Lord:

The purpose of this letter is to warmly congratulate you on your 5-in-5 vision for the Province of New Brunswick, and to express our interest in working with you in the years ahead to help fulfill your pledge to see our province lead the country in poverty reduction.

As you are no doubt aware, Saint John has been pioneering community efforts in poverty reduction for some years, and we would welcome a significant role in your provincial strategy. Saint John leaders have developed new “investment” models for vulnerable families and neighbourhoods, such as PALS for Prince Charles School, O.N.E. Change (Old North End neighbourhood), The Resource Centre for Youth (TRC) and First Steps, to help reduce long-term social costs as well as the pain, isolation and waste caused by subsistence living. The provincial government has been an important partner with these initiatives and others. Together we’re learning that multi-sector collaboration and comprehensive action are keys to change.

Our current level of engagement has allowed us to better understand the complex challenges of poverty, as well as the long term costs to families, communities and society. Local organizations like the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative, the Urban Core Support Network, the Human Development Council and Vibrant Communities Saint John have all chronicled how urban poverty has prevented too many Saint Johners from fully succeeding in life, and kept this great city from reaching its full potential. Fortunately, the Mayors of Greater Saint John have realized this as well, and have made poverty reduction a tenet of the True Growth strategy.

We are extremely pleased that the province has been showing leadership on this important issue and has made poverty reduction a provincial goal. To contribute to the provincial discussion, we are offering a few broad recommendations on how New Brunswick can substantially reduce poverty.

Make work pay. In Saint John, as in most other urban centres in the province, too many lone-parent families are dependent on social assistance for the bulk of their household income. The province has pledged to ease the transition from welfare to work, but for too many single-parents, entry-level employment can lead to reduced income. Other provinces appear to be more successful in ensuring that lone-parent families find it rewarding to enter the labour market. Perhaps it is time for New Brunswick to look at a more comprehensive work supplement (or an expanded child tax credit) to ensure single parent families receive sufficient income and thus, choose employment over social assistance.

Re-invest in vulnerable neighbourhoods. In Saint John (as in other urban centres in NB), too many poor families live in specific low-income neighbourhoods, often isolated from the rest of the community. In a number of these neighbourhoods, the government of New Brunswick is in fact the principal landlord, through the Department of Family and Community Services.

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In an effort to bridge the economic divide that separates these neighbourhoods from the rest of the province, it is essential that leaders from three levels of government and community sit at one table, with the residents, to actively bring about neighbourhood renewal. In two of Saint John's inner-city neighbourhoods, we are now learning how to work together, enabling vulnerable neighbourhoods to identify their own vision and priorities and to determine the necessary investments such as developing innovative parent and early childhood learning programs, ensuring a fair funding formula for inner city schools, embracing the community school model, and offering a more flexible approach to government contributions to affordable housing. Programs aimed at building teen leadership and reducing youth crime, more focussed programs to promote the renewal of our aging housing stock, and more activist public and private-sector investments in depressed economic zones in the urban core can also revitalize entire neighbourhoods.

Use Education and Employment to Break Poverty's Generational Cycle. In Saint John, the employment divide between those who have education credentials and those who do not is widening, hampering the further expansion of the local labour market. Improving high school completion rates is already a provincial goal, yet the number of young adults who have not completed high school in NB's largest centres (Fredericton, Moncton, Saint John) is still far too high. Given that these centres produce much of New Brunswick's economic growth, it is critical that the education needs of low-income children and young adults living in our cities are given proper attention, from kindergarten to the secondary and post-secondary level. Many high school students are struggling with current academic requirements and could benefit from alternative programs that combine basic academics with essential skills in the trades and service sectors.

Separate Urban Poverty from Rural Poverty. In your State of the Province address, you noted the demographic pull of the large urban areas of Southern New Brunswick. While the urban economic engines are continuing to move forward, the municipal governments in these cities are feeling growing financial pressures – arising out of the unique needs of the most vulnerable in the community. While continued social assistance payments can help alleviate some of the pressure facing our cities, they do not point toward the long-term goal of getting more New Brunswickers out of poverty. In addressing the goal of poverty reduction, we would suggest that the government of New Brunswick develop solutions that are specifically relevant for its urban areas. Our concern is that programs geared for rural application may not, in fact, be appropriate for cities such as Saint John.

Of course, the suggestions made above are by no means a conclusive list. Over the last few years, we have made a number of other local discoveries that can no doubt help to frame a provincial strategy for poverty reduction. We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss our learnings and common goals and plan a go forward strategy, together.

Sincerely,

Tom Gribbons
Chair of the Leadership Roundtable
Vibrant Communities Saint John

cc. The Honourable Trevor Holder
The Honourable Jeannot Volpé
The Honourable Madeleine Dubé
His Worship Norm MacFarlane

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