

2020 NORTHERN VISION NORD SYMPOSIUM EVENT PROCEEDINGS



Sarah McRae, PhD
Bethany Daigle, PhD
J.C. Herbert Emery, PhD

PROJECT TITLE

2020 Northern Vision Nord Symposium event proceedings

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

Dr. J.C. Herbert Emery, Director, AIPR

RESEARCH TEAM

Dr. Sarah McRae, Postdoctoral Fellow, AIPR

Dr. Bethany Daigle, Science Writer, NB-IRDT

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INTRODUCTION

The 2020 Northern Vision Nord Symposium, held March 13, 2020 at Danny's Inn and Conference Center in Beresford, was an opportunity for regional stakeholders to connect, share their perspectives, and brainstorm ideas with the goal of identifying actions that could positively impact the Northern New Brunswick (NB) economy. The Symposium was meant to be a starting point. Bringing together a coalition of stakeholders from diverse sectors, the event was organized around the goal of identifying a list of recommendations that could influence future policymaking and reinvigorate the region's economy.

Organized by the Transition Adjustment Committee chaired by Denis Caron of the Belledune Port Authority, the Symposium was meant to stimulate discussion and solicit solutions for economic challenges faced by the region, as well as generate ideas to attract investment, boost employment, and stimulate productivity. The adjustment committee, formed following the closure of the Glencore operation in Belledune, New Brunswick in October 2019, has committed to developing a Regional Economic Action Plan to attract investment, both industrial and non-industrial, to northern New Brunswick to counter the effects of the closure, as well as the more recent closure of Trevali Mines in March 2020.

This report summarizes key takeaways from the event, including insights from presentations, individual brainstorming activities, and collaborative group sessions.¹ The Symposium represents a first step towards arriving at a regional game plan. Attendees shared their visions for what Northern NB could look like in the medium- to long-term, if the right policy measures are put in place. These visions, it should be remarked, were not always aligned – notably, while many stakeholders were focused on building from existing strengths, such as manufacturing and extraction/processing of natural resources, still others were intent on diversifying the economy by building new strengths in sectors such as technology and tourism.

The report that follows aims to capture the diverse range of visions and strategies discussed over the course of the day, with some preliminary analysis of trends that emerged among the responses to questions posed to individuals and groups.² The report concludes by identifying three policy areas or themes that represent clusters of recommendations proposed by Symposium participants. These are:

Theme 1 - Northern NB Economic Zone

Theme 2 - The "Northern Tiger": Re-branding Northern NB

Theme 3 - Investments in transportation and education infrastructure

ECONOMIC CONTEXTS, INDUSTRIES, AND DEMOGRAPHICS

This section gives a brief overview of the economic context in Northern NB, with a focus on the Northeast region. It describes key points from two presentations that outline the current demographic and economic challenges facing Northeastern NB, with some analysis of how the region's traditional economic strengths – like manufacturing – might be leveraged to create sustainable economic growth. Dr. Herb Emery (Director of the Atlantic Institute for Policy Research and Vaughan Chair in Regional Economics at UNB) and John Calhoun (Senior Economist in the

¹ Some notes and recommendations from the Symposium sessions have been translated from the original French.

² The results presented in this report are based on transcriptions of the worksheets participants used to record their ideas during each session. Some wording has been changed for clarity and consistency to facilitate the analysis of patterns and trends while maintaining the spirit of the ideas.

Department of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour) gave presentations on manufacturing in the North and the state of the local workforce.

From the mid-20th century, Northern NB has been fueled economically by its rich natural resources and a strong industrial presence. In particular, the Northeast region comprised of Restigouche, Gloucester, and Northumberland counties has relied on a strong manufacturing sector to drive its economy, as well natural resource extraction and processing.

However, these industries have been suffering in recent years. This was apparent with the closure in 2013 of Brunswick Mine's Bathurst-area operation due to the exhaustion of underground deposits and the more recent, related closing of the Glencore smelter in November 2019, resulting in the loss of 420 jobs in Belledune, a small village of 1,400 people. Compared to the province as a whole, the Northeast region also faces pressing demographic challenges and labour shortages. As the region's young working-age population continues to migrate elsewhere in search of more opportunities, Northern NB's median age continues to creep upward.

The question of how to foster sustainable economic growth in the Northern part of the province has been a recurring one over the decades. For example, during the 1950s and 1960s, mineral development was the principal focus of economic planners in NB. Both the Flemming and Robichaud governments worked on creating the right conditions to attract industry to the region to develop its rich mineral deposits, such as ensuring adequate, affordable power supply and infrastructure was in place to support the level of industrial activity they were hoping to draw to the region.

With the mining industry showing signs of decline, more recent governments have attempted to create action plans for stimulating the Northern NB economy. In 2010, for example, the Graham government proposed "An Action Plan for Self-Sufficiency in Northern New Brunswick 2010-2013,"³ which identified opportunities for growth in modular fabrication and component construction industries, industrial development, and resource-based industries. The report outlined an action plan that involved branding the Northern industrial corridor and promoting the region as a destination for national and international firms, as well as investing in the certification, productivity, and competitiveness of regional companies. However, later in 2010, the Graham government was pushed out of office after only one term, starting a trend of short-lived successive provincial governments, which have made it difficult to enact any sustained efforts toward changing Northern NB's economic prospects.

Tapping the Potential of Manufacturing in the North

On March 12, the evening before the Symposium, Dr. Herb Emery spoke to a large group of stakeholders and community members at 13 Barrels, a craft brewery in Bathurst. His talk – "Tapping the Potential of the North" – emphasized the importance of manufacturing as a sector to study and strengthen if we want to grow the economy.

Northern New Brunswick, he pointed out, is a manufacturing economy. Across Restigouche, Gloucester, Northumberland, there are 2228 manufacturing firms that combined employ nearly 6,000 workers. While other manufacturing economies (such as Maine) have declined, manufacturing in NB remains resilient and continues to represent a large share of GDP and employment in the province. For example, in 2018,

³ Province of New Brunswick, "An Action Plan for Self-Sufficiency in Northern New Brunswick, 2010-2013." <https://www2.gnb.ca/content/dam/gnb/Departments/rdc-sdr/pdf/ActionPlan-e.pdf>

- The manufacturing sector represented 10.7% of NB's GDP, contributing \$3.0 billion (chained 2012 dollars);
- NB Labour Productivity for manufacturing was \$51.18 (average, 2012 chained dollars); and
- NB Labour Productivity for all other sectors was \$47.57 (average, 2012 chained dollars).

As Vaughan Chair of Regional Economics, Dr. Emery contributes to policy development in the province, with many of his contributions proceeding from his role as Chair of the JDI Roundtable for Manufacturing Competitiveness in New Brunswick. In 2019, the Roundtable established a coalition of NB-based manufacturers to identify common challenges to be addressed and overcome with frank discussion about policies and economic trends, as well as ways to leverage our strengths and move forward to a more prosperous future.

One action item to come out of the 2019 Roundtable Forum, held in Fredericton on September 25 and 26, was to implement a Lighthouse Strategy – that is, to identify good facilities that have the potential to become great and focus energy and investments on making them world-class. As Emery pointed out at 13 Barrels, the manufacturing sector in the Northeast is an economic Lighthouse, and the Port of Belledune has been identified by the Roundtable as a core asset in this strategy.

Although export-driven manufacturing focus has been absent from NB economic development plans for decades, firms with a robust export focus and domestic supply chains have high potential to raise productivity and GDP. However, insufficient domestic capacity limits the potential for growth. Insights from the JDI Roundtable suggest areas government policy should focus on to address this issue include building the workforce, ensuring secure supplies of energy, and developing access to markets, financial capital, and state of the art technology. Because labour force challenges are a recurring theme for manufacturers in the province – sometimes forcing investment out of the province – there is a need to identify who owns and/or leads workforce development in NB.

In addition, to encourage sustainable growth in the manufacturing sector, manufacturers have identified a need for government to make it easier both to produce within NB and to export outside the province. Measures could include:

- Red tape reduction;
- Taxes and investment incentives;
- Policy consistency, with an arms-length economic development agency;
- Flexibility in programs supporting growth (i.e., Economic Opportunity Zones);
- Energy supply/cost; and/or
- Transportation services.

Further, there is a need to build NB's reputation as a fiscally stable and predictable environment in which to do business and establish clear priority criteria for investment.

The Workforce in Northeast New Brunswick

Dr. Emery's discussion of labour force challenges were echoed in John Calhoun's presentation the next morning, which provided essential context for the discussions that followed. A Senior Economist in the Policy, Research and Market Analysis branch of PETL, Calhoun reviewed specific struggles reflected in the North's population and workforce statistics.⁴ For example,

- While the population of NB grew by 3.6% from 2009 to 2019, the population of the Northeast region shrank by 3.5%;
- While average annual net migration of individuals in their 20s is positive in Central NB, it is negative in the Northeast;
- 26.1% of the population in the Northeast is over the age of 65, which is higher than the provincial average of 21.3%;
- The employment rate in the Northeast is 45.8%, lower than the provincial rate of 56.5%; likewise, the unemployment rate in the Northeast is 12.7%, much higher than the provincial rate of 7.9%; and
- The Northeast also has a lower labour force participation rate: 52.6%, compared to the provincial rate of 61.4%.

In addition, a significantly higher proportion of the population in the Northeast receives Employment Insurance benefits compared to the rest of the province. For instance, in January 2019, over 15% of the working-age population in the Northeast received EI, compared to around 5% of the working-age population in the rest of the province.

According to Calhoun, the labour force challenges facing the Northeast include an aging population, labour shortages and mismatches, and stagnant labour productivity. However, although these challenges are likely to persist, efforts can be made to improve the situation. PETL forecasts 120,000 job openings in the Northeast by the year 2027, many of which will require college or apprenticeship training. To meet the coming demand, policies should reflect better alignment of post-secondary education and immigration with labour market needs. Further, policies need to focus on supporting private investment and a competitive business environment.

⁴ These statistics and related information can be viewed in GNB's Regional Profile Reports, available online at <https://www.nbjobs.ca/trends/regional>.

EVENT STRUCTURE

The Symposium was facilitated by NouLAB, an NB-based social and public innovation lab, with the aim of bringing together stakeholders from across sectors to develop new approaches to long-standing issues by harnessing multi-disciplinary intelligence.

NouLAB collaborator Joanna Brown laid out ground rules for participants, which included instructions to speak from experience in order to bring “thick data” into the discussion. Thick data, she explained, is the knowledge that comes from context, experience, and other forms of knowledge brought by individuals into a discussion. This kind of qualitative data can supplement and nuance the knowledge provided by studies employing quantitative data that captures information on a larger scale.

Sixty-seven stakeholders were in attendance. Both public and private sector stakeholders were represented, coming from a wide variety of fields, sectors, and interests, including:

- Economic development agencies
- Business incubators and accelerators
- Chambers of Commerce
- First Nations
- Marketing and Communications
- HR and Recruitment
- Provincial Government Departments
- Fisheries
- Natural Resources
- Forestry
- Municipal Politics
- Tourism and Hospitality
- Construction
- Information Technology
- Engineering
- Post-Secondary Education and Research
- Infrastructure
- Consulting
- Finance
- Professional Services
- Manufacturing

The event was structured to focus on five key theme areas:



Economic &
Fiscal Policy



Infrastructure



Human
Resources &
Workforce



Economic
Development
Opportunities
& Focus Areas



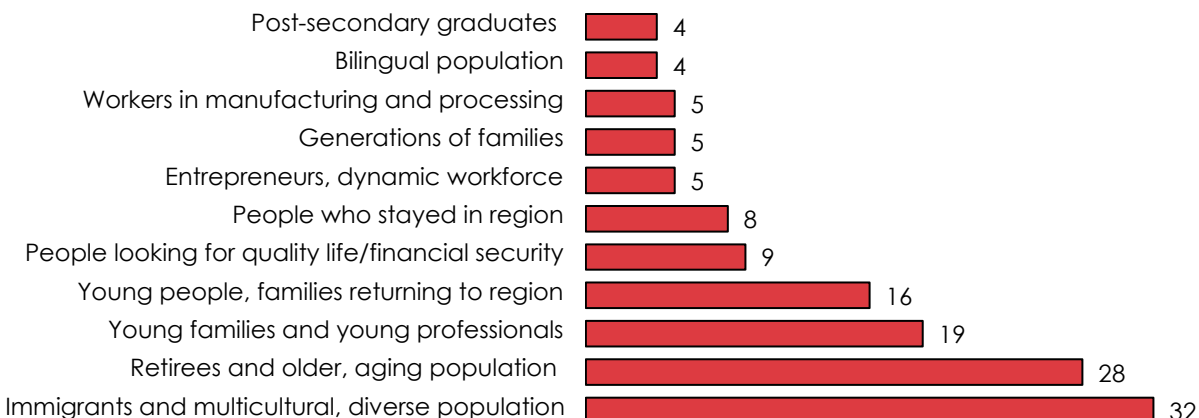
Role of Local
Investments
& Local
Leadership

Attendees were encouraged to identify a theme area they were most interested in and work with other participants in the same stream for the majority of the event to workshop ideas. Of the five streams, “Economic Development Opportunities and Focus Areas” was by the most popular by far, chosen by nearly half of attendees. “Human Resource and Workforce” and “Role of Local Investments and Local Leadership,” in comparison, had fewer representatives. Towards the end of the day, attendees were encouraged to change up their groups and collaborate with people from other streams to narrow down their lists of recommendations.

PERSPECTIVE 2030

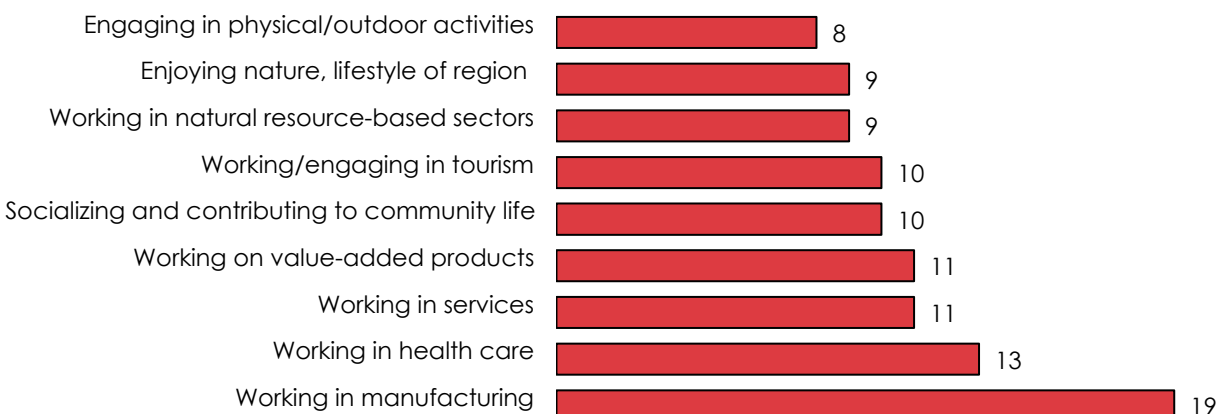
In the first workshop session, individuals were asked to brainstorm individually about what Northern NB's population might look like in 2030. Asked "Who is living in Northern NB in 2030?" individuals listed their ideas. The graph below indicates the top responses, with the number of individual mentions indicated on the right:

Who is living in Northern NB in 2030?



As for what people in Northern NB are *doing* in 2030, individuals predicted the following:

What are people doing in Northern NB in 2030?



Next, attendees were asked to think about how Northern NB communities will measure success in 2030.

Among the top predictions:

How does our community measure success in 2030?



Lastly, for the individual exercise, participants were prompted to consider what aspects of this 2030 future "we could not have predicted in 2020." There was less consensus on this point than with the previous questions, likely due to different interpretations of the question, and whether the question was meant to prompt "best case scenario" visions or forecast possible disruptions. Participants diverged notably in their levels of optimism.

Below are some of the most frequently cited ideas:

What could we not have predicted about this future in 2020?

- Collaboration (x5)
- Changes because of climate effects (x5)
- Outside influences we cannot control and their impact on global markets (x5)
- How well we're doing economically / our success rate (x5)
- Demographics / population change and growth (x4)
- Increase in trade barriers reduce global economy, focus on local economy/local economic ecosystems (x4)
- The diversity and value of immigration, impact of diverse culture (x4)
- Changes due to extreme political and social movements (x3)
- Change in mentalities – small industries becoming a model (x3)
- Movement toward green economy (x3)

After this initial brainstorming activity, individuals were asked to convene in groups to share their ideas and narrow down their lists to a few top responses to the same questions, which they recorded on group worksheets. Eleven groups filled out worksheets.

Returning to the first question, “describe who is living in Northern NB in 2030,” groups had the following predictions:

Who is living in Northern NB in 2030?

- Immigrants (x4)
- Multi-cultural/diverse (x3)
- Multi-generational families living together (x2)
- Seniors and retired/aging population (x2)
- Bilingual
- Young professionals
- Young people returning to region
- No fighting between language or rival groups
- Entrepreneurs
- Dynamic population

As for what the population is doing in 2030, groups recorded the following ideas:

What are people in Northern NB doing in 2030?

- Working online/from home (x3)
- Outdoor activities (x2)
- Starting/working for small- or medium-sized enterprises (x2)
- Working in health/lifestyle (x2)
- Working for government
- Working in industry/manufacturing
- Development of resources
- Vibrant regional network
- Environmentalism
- Amalgamation
- Studying
- Opening and buying businesses
- Being more welcoming as a community
- Working in tourism

When asked how the community will measure success in 2030, there was little repetition between groups. Responses included:

How does our community measure success in 2030?

- More active population (work and social)
- Family
- Less unemployment
- Value-added transformation
- Growth of diverse population
- Product and knowledge export

- Transportation success
- Immigration
- Community engagement
- Statistics
- Environment
- Tourism
- More diverse economy
- Collaboration between communities
- Celebrating small successes
- Individuals feel they can fulfill potential in North
- Change of mentality to focus on strengths
- More self-sufficient community

For the question “what could we not have predicted about this future in 2020,” groups wrote down the following:

What could we not have predicted about this future in 2020?

- More local economy
- Decentralization of government services
- Negative impact of debt
- More online work opportunities
- Impact of technology on how we do business
- Urban to rural shift
- Impact of social pressure
- Development of entrepreneurial leadership
- Environment
- Seniors transfer knowledge/mentor
- Migration of young people towards rural areas
- Regional collaboration
- Improved demographic outlook
- Exponential positive growth

ANALYSIS

There is strong indication that many attendees envision a more diverse Northern population a decade from now, led by increased immigration. Given the current state of immigration in NB where about 50% of immigrants leave the province within five years,⁵ it is likely that achieving this goal for 2030 would require some policy action targeted toward immigrant retention in the province, especially in the North. The same NB-IRDT study shows that Francophone immigrants are more likely to remain in the province than English-speaking immigrants. However, the entrepreneur category was least likely to stay in the province, as three-fifths of newcomers starting businesses depart within six years.

⁵ Leonard, P., McDonald, T., & Miah, P. (2019). Immigrant retention in New Brunswick: Results from BizNet and Citizen Database. Fredericton, NB: New Brunswick Institute for Research, Data and Training. <https://www.unb.ca/nbirdt/assets/documents/nbirdt/research/2019-immigrant-retention-bw.pdf>

On the other hand, “working in health care” was one of the most-cited descriptions of what people will be doing in Northern NB in 2030, and the study mentioned above also shows that immigrants working in health care are more likely to remain in the province than those working in other industries (nearly 75% remaining in the province after six years). So, while it may be unrealistic to expect large numbers of immigrants to settle in the region for the purpose of starting businesses without targeted incentives in place, the increasing demand for health care services due to the growing senior population also commonly cited in the above activity may contribute to increased immigration.

Returning to the individual responses to the “who is living in Northern NB in 2030” question, the third-most commonly cited demographic after immigrants and aging population was young people and families. Many respondents specifically mentioned young people returning to the region after having moved away. It is not clear whether respondents are hoping these young return-migrants will prompt an economic boost or increased productivity in the region by bringing back training and skills obtained elsewhere, or whether they hope improved labour force conditions in the region prompted by specific policy levers will eventually attract young people home.

There is evidence that the former scenario is unlikely: a 2017 article from NB-IRDT on the effects of return migration to the region from Western provinces concludes, “Policies aimed at increasing the number of return migrants or immigrants will also not cause growth in the economy,” and further, it is “more likely that return migration is symptomatic of the opportunities being created in the home economy,” and “policies that promote investment in technology and improve labour market conditions are more likely to spur growth, attract migration and encourage retention.”⁶

As for what people will be doing in Northern NB in 2030, the most common answer among the individual responses was “working in manufacturing,” with “working on value-added products” also appearing high on the list. This indicates that building from existing regional strengths – such as manufacturing – was top of mind for many participants.

However, it is clear from comparing the top responses to this question that Symposium participants were approaching the question in two distinct ways: while references to top employment sectors dominated the list (working in manufacturing, health care, service, tourism, natural resources), still others approached the question as a way of gauging the general health of the community by envisioning a future where residents are widely engaging in enjoying various activities contributing to general quality of life, such as participating in community networks and enjoying the outdoors.

Comparing the top two responses individuals had to the question “How does our community measure success in 2030” encapsulates the two focuses outlined above. Twenty mentioned “lower unemployment rate,” while 16 cited “health and wellness of population.” These divergent focuses should not be viewed as evidence of tension or disagreement, however. Because individuals and groups were invited to list multiple responses to each question, the reality is that many of them cited indicators falling under both “employment/industry sector growth” and “quality of life” categories.

An important question to ask moving forward is which policies are best equipped to prompt improvements in both categories. For instance, it is possible that policies aimed at producing growth in certain key employment sectors have the effect of contributing to the improved quality

⁶ Emery, H., McDonald, J.T., & Morissette, R. (2017). The Economic Impacts of Migrant New Brunswick to Alberta/Saskatchewan and Return to New Brunswick. Fredericton, NB: New Brunswick Institute for Research, Data and Training.

https://www.nbjobs.ca/sites/default/files/pdf/2017-07-22_the_economic_impacts_of_return_migration.pdf

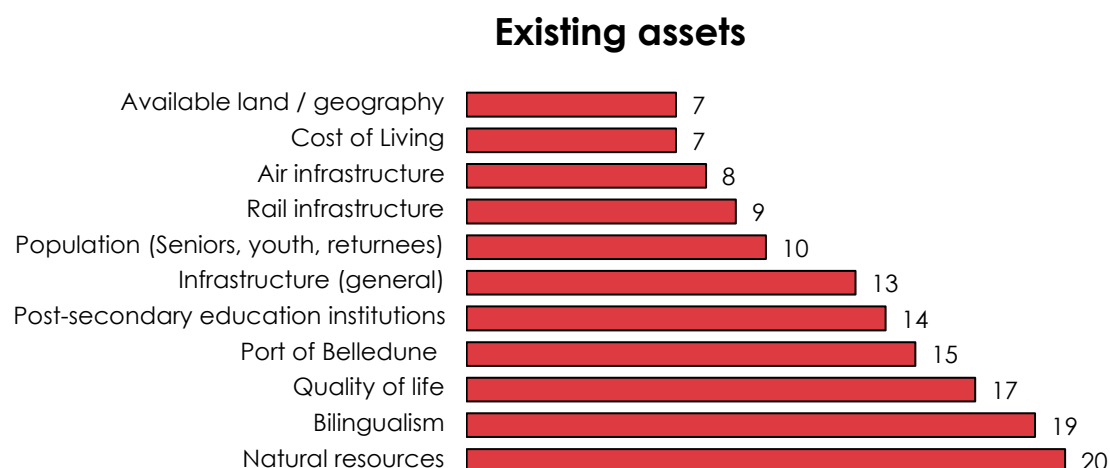
of life indicator by bringing more people and money into the region, encouraging growth of tourism and recreation activities in the region, as well as the return of young migrants.

It is interesting to observe how the responses changed when participants were asked to answer the same set of questions in groups. While 19 individual worksheets mentioned “working in manufacturing” in response to the question of what people are doing in Northern NB in 2030, only one of 11 groups cited manufacturing for the same question. Instead, “working from home/online” was the most popular response from groups.

Apart from the “who will be living in Northern NB in 2030” question, where the group responses more or less track with the individual responses, there appears to have been little consensus between groups. This may be somewhat surprising, considering the individual responses to the same questions show that many people in the room were thinking along the same lines in terms of what people will be doing in 2030 (working in manufacturing, health care, services) and “how will we measure success in 2030” (unemployment rate, quality of life, population growth). It is possible that individuals wanted to avoid conflict by settling on indicators that everybody could agree on – for example, quality of life indicators like “enjoying the outdoors.”

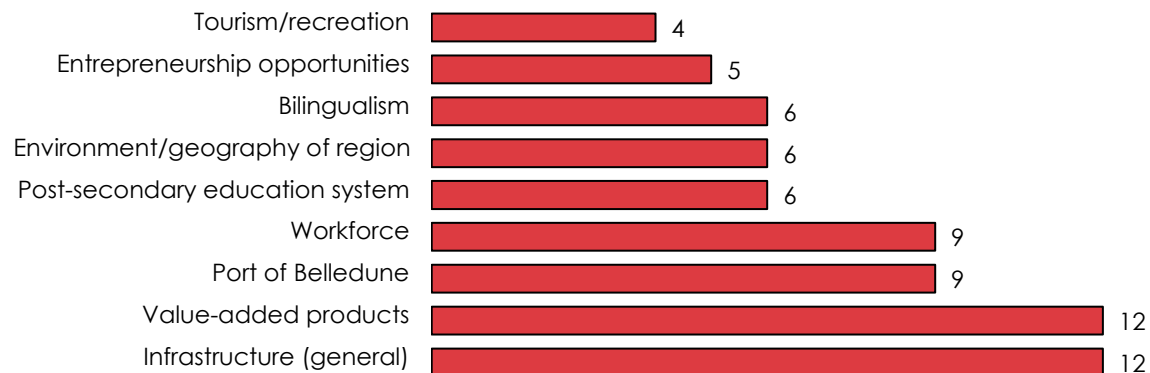
ASSETS

The next part of the Symposium was devoted to taking inventory of Northern NB's existing assets and how they might be leveraged toward future growth. Individuals were first asked to jot down what they considered to be the region's strongest economic assets. The top responses were:



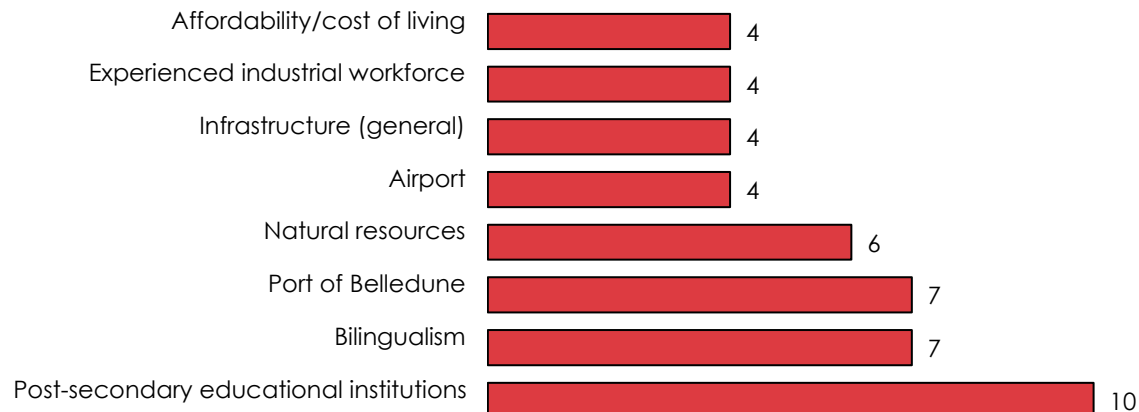
Individuals were also asked which assets need to be kept in mind when considering actions that will shape the future of Northern NB. The following assets had the most mentions:

Which assets need to be top of mind when shaping future of Northern NB?



In 11 groups, participants were asked to share the lists of assets they had come up with and, together, fill out worksheets with the top assets they had identified. The first question the participants answered as a group was “what assets are we working with?” Below are the top responses:

Existing assets (groups)



When asked to limit their list of assets to a few key items, groups varied considerably in which assets they considered key. Only a few assets got multiple mentions among the 11 groups. They were:

Key assets

- Trade/transportation infrastructure (x5)
- Post-secondary educational institutions (x3)
- Natural resources (x3)
- Affordability/cost of living (x2)

In the next part of the activity, groups were asked to state what they believe Northern NB's assets were helping the region achieve today. Again, there wasn't much agreement between the different groups. The most common responses were:

Achievement

- Access to markets (x4)
- Attracting investment (x3)
- Innovation (x2)
- Attract talent (x2)
- Attracting/retaining young people through post-secondary opportunities (x2)

A theme we see emerging is that, despite disagreement between groups as to what constitute Northern NB's key assets and how they are being leveraged, one asset that stands out is the region's trade infrastructure and the access to markets it enables.

Asked what these assets could help Northern NB achieve *if leveraged to their full potential*, people said:

Possible achievement

- Increase value-added goods (x5)
- Attract investment (x3)
- Attract/develop tourism (x2)
- Expand global market (x2)
- Leverage knowledge/post-secondary system for new products, training programs (x2)
- Attract qualified workers (x2)

The groups were also given the challenge to summarize their discussions of assets into one key insights. A few insights to emerge out of the discussion included:

"Attract, retain, and develop workforce that is productive, engaged, and competent to attract investment"

"Industrial infrastructure and supports to run a global export business are already in place. Need to revitalize the segment that can use them"

"Current resources/business supports are only slowing decline, like a 'parachute with holes in it'"

"Focus on traditional infrastructure will encourage traditional development"

"Quality workforce by trade and language skills"

ANALYSIS

When individuals were asked to list Northern NB's top assets, the most common responses were "natural resources," "bilingualism," and "quality of life," in that order. Infrastructure – and the Port of Belledune in particular – were also high on the list, as were the region's post-secondary educational institutions. Interestingly, when the question was framed differently so individuals were asked which assets need to be kept *top of mind* when planning the region's future, bilingualism

and natural resources fell further down the list, and infrastructure, including the port, as well as “value-added products,” moved up the list to become the top priorities.

The term “value-added” came up frequently over the course of the day. The Lean Six Sigma concept of value-added in manufacturing refers not only to activities that add value, as well as the reduction of necessary activities that cannot be eliminated, and the elimination of wasteful activities that do not add anything to the product.⁷

After people divided into groups and answered the same questions, “post-secondary institutions” emerged as the most commonly cited asset in the region instead of natural resources, which was pushed back to fourth place. This may have something to do with post-secondary education and training being a less divisive topic to discuss in groups compared to the exploitation of natural resources. Bilingualism and the existing port infrastructure in Belledune were still high on the list.

Once groups were asked to narrow down their lists to a top few key assets, there was little consensus among the 11 groups, except that infrastructure got five mentions, followed by post-secondary institutions and natural resource, which each got three. A pattern emerges here: While individuals and groups frequently mentioned bilingualism when compiling their general lists of assets, it seems to disappear once participants are asked to narrow down their lists to the top assets, indicating stakeholders didn’t view bilingualism as the region’s ticket to economic rejuvenation.

In contrast, Northern NB’s trade and transportation infrastructure was popularly cited as something to keep top of mind when setting plans to enhance the region’s future prospects. When asked what Northern NB’s top assets could help the region achieve if leveraged to their full potential, five out of 11 groups mentioned value-added products. The second most cited accomplishment was “attract investment.” Here we see some agreement between the individual brainstorming sessions and the group workshops – while there was still a broad range of priorities among Symposium participants where assets are concerned, leveraging existing infrastructure to attract investment and manufacture and export value-added products appears to have been top of mind for many in the room.

DESIGNING OUR FUTURE

As the Symposium approached its end, participants were called upon to start brainstorming recommendations for achieving the regional visions described earlier in the day using the inventory of assets captured in the preceding activity.

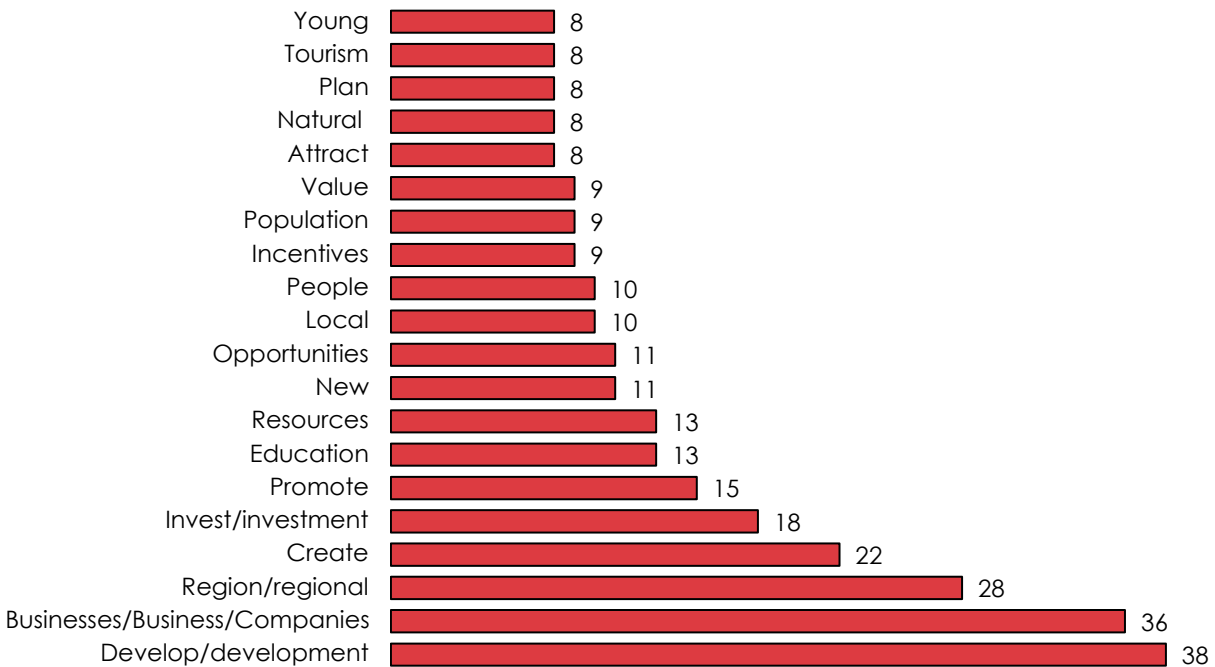
First, individuals were given sheets with eight squares to fill with recommendations. The facilitators urged people to fill in all their blocks without being overly critical of their recommendations at this early stage. The full list of individual recommendations can be found at the end of this report. To get a broader understanding of the lines of thinking that emerged during this initial brainstorming activity, we show the most frequently occurring words in the graph below.⁸

⁷Think lean Six Sigma, “The concept of value added in Lean Manufacturing.”

<https://www.thinkleansixsigma.com/article/value-added>

⁸ The top word occurrences were obtained by taking the transcribed and translated body of text from the individual recommendations and plugging it into *Voyant Tools*, a web-based reading and analysis environment for digital texts. <https://voyant-tools.org/>

Most used words - Individual worksheets



Unsurprisingly, “action words” (“develop,” “create,” “invest,” “promote,” etc.) make up a high proportion of the most frequently occurring words. Variations of “business” and “company” were also commonly used, indicating that many of the recommendations individuals drafted on their own had businesses as their focus, which might encompass measures focused on creating the right economic conditions to attract new businesses to the region or putting resources into helping existing businesses increase their productivity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Participants were next asked to each take their top three recommendations and write them out on post-it notes. In nine groups, individuals shared their recommendations and discussed where to place them on a grid with one axis rating the level of difficulty required to enact the recommendation and the other axis rating the potential impact.

Below are the recommendations that occurred at least twice during the group session, organized according to the level of effort required and the expected impact, as assessed by the groups.

Out of 153 individual post-it notes, there were only 16 ideas that came up multiple times.

	Minimum Effort	Medium Effort	Maximum Effort
Maximum Impact	<p>Ask youth what they want (x2)</p>	<p>Develop integrated transportation strategy (air, roads, ports, rail) (x2)</p> <p>More education opportunities in region (x2)</p> <p>Innovation (x2)</p> <p>Manufacturing 2nd & 3rd transformation, value-added products (x3)</p> <p>More positive branding of region (x5)</p> <p>Sell our niche assets (bilingualism, geography, quality of life) (x2)</p>	<p>New industry companies ("value-added") (x2)</p> <p>Tax free zones (x3)</p> <p>Regional collaboration/shared vision (x3)</p>
Medium Impact	<p>More education opportunities in region, specific educational programs (x2)</p> <p>More commitment to local supply chain/business partnerships (x3)</p> <p>Develop/brand tourism industry (x3)</p>	<p>Develop tourism and recreation (x3)</p> <p>Improve infrastructure (rails, road, port access) (x3)</p> <p>Streamline and incentivize repatriation for those with roots in North (x2)</p> <p>Promote region to young families and retired people (x2)</p>	
Minimum Impact	<p>Create campaign to better sell assets/branding region positively (x4)</p> <p>More collaboration, fewer silos (x2)</p>		

Given how the previous activities seemed to be building towards key recommendations focused on leveraging existing infrastructure and manufacturing strengths, it may be surprising that the most frequently mentioned recommendations for this activity were focused on positively “branding” the region by creating a campaign to better sell its assets. While some of the individual recommendations cited branding the region specifically for tourism or to attract key populations (young families and retired people), most weren’t clear on the audience of this campaign, and whether the goal of the marketing initiative would be to attract investors and new businesses, to bring new migrants/immigrants to the region, or to promote tourism – likely, the recommendations represent a mix of all three objectives. Those making this recommendation varied in how they rated its difficulty and impact, with five people rating it “maximum impact/medium effort” and four rating it “minimum impact/minimum effort.”

In the final activity of the day, groups were asked to choose three recommendations from the list they had been discussing together and present their findings to the room. In addition to describing these recommendations, presenters had to explain why each recommendation is important, and what efforts or resources would be needed to make it happen. All these recommendations are recorded in the Appendix at the end of the report.

Based on the recommendations produced at the end of the day, a handful of themes emerge:

Theme 1: Northern NB Economic Zone

Several of the recommendations coming out of the workshop sessions could be leveraged together to create a special Northern NB economic zone focused on creating incentives and supports to grow manufacturing and R&D in the region, enabling the develop and export of value-added products.

Symposium participants identified fiscal policies surrounding taxes and tariffs with the potential to attract investment and give local industries a boost. Multiple groups proposed a free trade zone (sometimes referred to as a “foreign trade zone”), which is a designated area within a country where foreign companies can import materials, manufacture goods and export products without being limited by the usual rules and taxes.⁹ These zones are often organized around major points of entry, such as airports or shipping ports, making the Port of Belledune a likely candidate. The suggestion of a “tax-free zone” gets at the same idea. Tax free zones are designated areas in which specified businesses received special tax incentives. They can be used in conjunction with “enterprise zones,” which are specific regions “in which business growth is encouraged by the government through tax relief and financial concession.”¹⁰ Enterprise zones may seek to attract new businesses and industry to an area or help existing establishments.

Some groups zeroed in on manufacturing as a key area for future policymaking. Groups proposed utilizing local R&D centres to develop novel, value-added products and services that could increase exports and boost development of the regional manufacturing sector. The term “niche environment for R&D and manufacturing” was used by one group, which might imply further incentives for manufacturers doing business in the region.

Although groups differed regarding tactics for encouraging the creation of a special economic zone in the region, they agreed that support from government would be necessary, whether through increased investment tax incentives or funding of services for entrepreneurs. To gain this

⁹ “Free trade zone,” Cambridge Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/free-trade-zone>.

¹⁰ “Enterprise zone,” Merriam-Webster Dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/enterprise%20zone>

government support, strong leadership would need to be identified and communications plans set in action. Political buy-in would need to be won through a strong business case, stakeholder engagement, targeted communications, and lobbying efforts directed at government.

Theme 2: The “Northern Tiger”: Re-branding Northern NB

Groups identified a need for increased regional collaboration and a shared vision for how to create a stronger future for the Northern NB economy. This could involve increased partnerships between different stakeholder groups, including businesses and different levels of government. This collaboration could be as simple as sharing ideas and best practices, as one group noted. Others emphasized setting common strategic goals so more resources can be funneled in that direction. The recommendations weren't so clear on how “region” is defined here – were groups thinking of the North of the province broadly, of the Northeast region in particular, or of specific counties and municipalities? The difficulty of arriving at a shared regional vision, of course, increases as the geographic scope widens.

Several recommendations approached the question of how to boost Northern NB's economy through the lens of communications. While one recommendation outlines the need for a specific communications plan to “tell the North's story” as a way of attracting investment and keeping the region top of mind for government, others alluded more broadly to focusing on branding efforts in order to enact a change of mindset locally by placing more value on the region's assets – and, in so doing, attract more people, businesses, and investment to the area. On a different but related note, one recommendation highlighted the need for local leaders and “influencers” to become ambassadors for the North to facilitate the attraction and retention of talent.

In terms of what efforts would be required to increase regional collaboration, groups identified community buy-in and engaging a broad coalition of stakeholders as key. More pressing, however, would be identifying the substance of the shared regional vision and strategic plan. Groups didn't outline an approach for doing so, but it is presumed that consultative events like the Symposium could be involved. Targeted media and communications efforts would be also needed to create awareness of this regional vision and successfully re-brand the North. The most detailed group plan noted the importance of a business case and a good PR plan. One group mentioned the need for money to fund these communications efforts.

Theme 3: Investing in transportation and education

To create sustainable economic growth in the North, Symposium participants identified education and transportation infrastructure as key areas for investment.

Some groups identified a need for more concerted efforts towards promoting entrepreneurship in the region, especially through education and services targeted towards youth. Goals for these efforts would include “selling” youth on the region and avoiding further out-migration. Groups also hoped to diversify the economy by encouraging the formation of first-generation entrepreneurs.

This outreach would likely involve promoting existing programs, such as education and training opportunities, as well as supports for new businesses. In the longer term, efforts would be directed toward promoting entrepreneurship through changes to educational curriculum and creating more opportunities for education and training regionally.

Another theme that emerged was facilitating improved trade capacity by improving existing infrastructure and developing an integrated transportation strategy that includes air, roads, port, and rail. The goal of these investments would be to make the region more accessible and attractive to industries by removing barriers or restrictions on the transportation of goods.

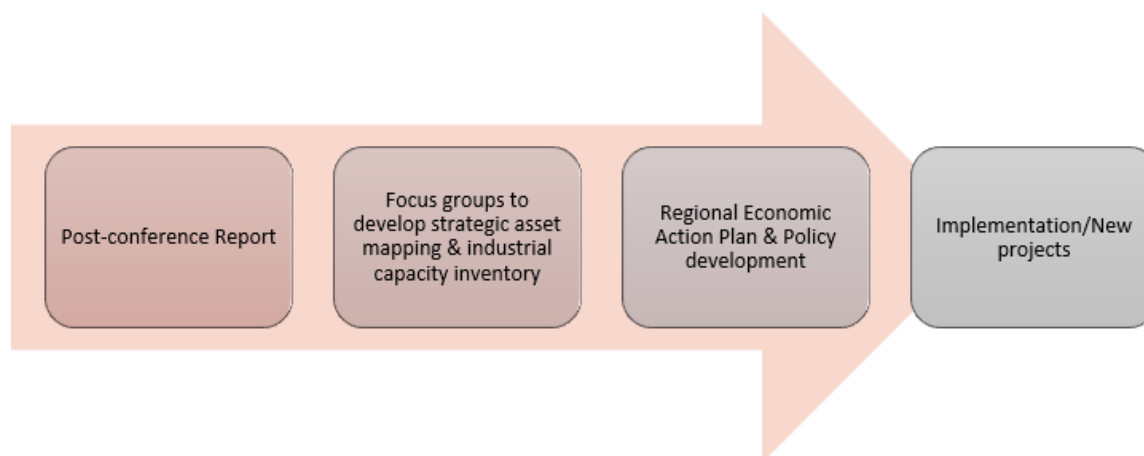
Groups said action in this area would require political will, necessitating stakeholder engagement across all levels of government. A plan would need to be developed for assigning resources and determining where to direct investments.

MOVING FORWARD

The 2020 Northern Vision Nord Symposium brought together a group of regional stakeholders with a shared commitment to improving the economic outlook of Northern NB. At the end of the day, the recommendations they produced give a preliminary reading of what community leaders perceive as the region's key assets and opportunities. The sessions described in this report represent a first step toward achieving the goal of sustainable regional economic growth. With further consultation from local business leaders and industry representatives, the next step is to produce tangible action plans to present to government. Thanks to those who organized and attended the Symposium, the region is closer to addressing its challenges and realizing its full potential – however, more work remains.

The Transition Adjustment Committee has identified additional milestones that must be met to identify specific policy recommendations and present an actionable strategic plan to help Northern NB return to prosperity.

The next step will be to consult with leaders from key sectors and groups including manufacturing, strategic transportation, capacity building (infrastructure), and First Nations. The committee will use focus groups to complete a strategic asset map and industrial capacity inventory to facilitate regional planning. In addition, these focus groups will gather and validate strategic information required to attract new investment to the region. These are key activities to facilitate the development of the regional economic development action plan. The purpose of the focus groups will be to provide input and guidance on the three main strategic pillars identified in this post-conference report.



A note regarding COVID-19

The 2020 Northern Vision Nord Symposium was held March 13, 2020 – less than a week later, on March 19, the province of New Brunswick announced a State of Emergency. The discussions recorded in this report reflect a reality where COVID-19 was still emerging as a threat and the general public did not yet understand how greatly this pandemic would impact our economy within a short period of time. Since then, the COVID-19 situation has impacted the ability of all industries and sectors to form long-term plans – at least, for the time being, all short-term planning must be flexible, as the provincial government warns us that lockdown levels are likely to fluctuate over the next year or more.

All of this does not mean that economic growth plans are futile. Indeed, such plans are more important than ever. In the coming months, the Northern Vision committee, as well as Northern NB stakeholders and business owners, will have an opportunity to present a vision for re-invigorating the Northern economy during a time when governments at all levels are investigating how to emerge from the COVID-19 recession. Planners and policymakers will be looking for answers to ensure the “new normal” we face when this pandemic is over includes positive changes that could see the province transition into a period of transformation and growth. Hopefully, if the initial work discussed in this report continues, this new reality will be one that leverages Northern resources, assets, and expertise.

APPENDIX – Participants’ Recommendations

Although individual recommendations varied slightly in wording, as well as in their justification and approach, we were able to roughly group recommendations by theme:

Recommended action	Why is this important?	What is needed?
Overall branding - mindset, job and business opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Put value on our assets• Differentiate from other regions• Create sense of pride and ownership in region	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Needs to be a priority• Need "regional champions," social media presence• Educate young people and parents about possibilities
Sell our niche assets to investors and immigrants - bilingualism, geography, quality of life	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Easier to sell region by focusing on niche assets	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• New focus on current efforts• Videos and websites can align on communications• More money

Establish communications plan to tell North's story to Southern NB urban centres and extra-provincial/local audiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve local morale • Create opportunities for investment/partnerships • Attract people to North • Improve brand of region • Keep North top of mind for government 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local business buy-in • Municipal buy-in • Strong private sector economic development agency • Good PR plan • Digital communications infrastructure • Full time writer
Empowering leaders, influencers and citizens to become ambassadors for North	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community and businesses should work together for greater success in attraction, retention and development of talent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Buy-in
Regional collaboration - partners, municipal, businesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work together toward common objectives • Increase chance of success • Share ideas, best practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage key partners • Take concrete actions on priorities • Engage public and private sector • Need money
A defined regional vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create alignment on strategic actions, set priorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local people • Common goal • Identify champion • Create a diverse coalition
Collaboration within region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More resources pushing in same direction enables establishment of consistent regional priorities, enables focus on strengths 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community by community buy-in • Lobbying • Communication infrastructure and plan
Create free trade zone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attract new investment • Create industry cluster • Create spin-offs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gov't buy-in to create policy • Political will • Available space

Tax free zones	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote investment Expansion of existing business 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Federal and provincial buy-in Lobbying Communication plan Business case
Invest in youth - create sense of belonging so they want to return or stay in region, raise families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create relief New ideas, creativity, Maintain or increase population Maintain or improve services "Sell" youth on branding of region 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investment in youth Have more outreach to youth
Promote entrepreneurship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stimulate first generation entrepreneurship Diversify economy Retain youth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote existing programs Education curriculum More education opportunities regionally
Develop integrated transportation strategy - air, roads, port, rail	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Optimize current infrastructure Coordinate investments Make region more accessible and attractive to industries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stakeholder engagement (fed/prov gov't, municipalities, First Nations) Assign resources to create strategy
Improve infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remove barriers or restrictions on transportation of goods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investment Political will Existing expertise and resources
Attract a niche environment for R&D and manufacturing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Economic development aided by novel products R&D centres assets for region Sectors bring new money through exports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New focus on current efforts Videos and websites can align on communications Unsure how to deliver message
Develop value-added products and services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase access to global markets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investors Policies Incentive programs

Creation of venture capital network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growth requires investment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership • Provincial policy • Tax incentives
Incubators/co-operatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New generation of entrepreneurs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership • Funding • Support/buy-in • Branding • Advertising
Strategic investment in enterprises to make them employers of choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate attraction, retention, and development of talent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness • Understanding of ROI • Buy-in • Investment • Legislation
Ensure financing of initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To support and grow small- or medium-sized enterprises and large employers 	N/A
Reduce "red tape" and politics surrounding business decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NB has a reputation of not being open for business, eliminate politics, accelerate investment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Anti-red tape" committee • Resources for navigating local system • Ask agencies to suggest "top 3" lists to simplify navigation of their departments
Prioritization of local business and supply chain (buy local)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduction of outgoing cash flow • Increased opportunity within region 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transparency around available local options • Promotions and guides • Branding • Policy