

Selling Atlantica

'If we can't fix this, eliminate some of the barriers that are now in place, we're not going to see the level of economic growth needed to sustain our society. Our kids are moving'

By STEVE PROCTOR Business Editor

EARLIER this summer Brent Sansom was hired as vice-president of Atlantica for the Atlantic Provinces Chambers of Commerce and charged with selling the creation of a distinct economic co-operation region that encompasses Atlantic Canada and a large section of the U.S. Northeast. Late last week he sat down for an interview with Chronicle Herald Business Editor Steve Proctor. Here are some excerpts from that interview.

Q: Atlantica has been portrayed as everything from an economic panacea to a big business smack-down on unions and labour standards. What is the version of Atlantica that you are promoting?

A: There are a lot of activities going on at municipal, provincial and the cross-border levels that are focused on growing the region. The Atlantica initiative is simply looking at ways of bringing the people behind those initiatives to one table and trying to create synergies or to solve problems that no one player in the group can do on their own. It's not about knocking down barriers for the sake of knocking them down. It's about rationalization and bringing harmonization to the way we do business as a region.

Q: What are the initial challenges you see?

A: Just 25 days into the job I see there are three main questions to be answered. What are we going to do as a region called Atlantica to attract more business that plays to our strengths? That can mean be goods and services or investment. No. 2: What are we going to do to increase the value of our goods and services by extending beyond our local boundaries? And No. 3: What are we doing to get the goods and services that we are bringing through here to market?

We don't think in terms of Atlantica. I didn't wake up this morning and hear the Atlantica news. I have to work hard to find those things that are happening in Boston and Bangor that might be relevant to my business. It's not in our mindset to be thinking about us as a region. I'd like to change that.

Q: You've been hired on a full-time basis by the Atlantic Provinces Chambers of Commerce. That's a big commitment for a relatively small organization. Why is it so important?

A: We need to have unprecedented economic growth in this region. That means there has to be a level of change that moves us from where we are to something with national recognition. The Atlantic Provinces Chamber of Commerce has looked at this for the last two years. There have been two conferences with cross-sector attendance. The business community decided it was time to take on a leadership role.

The more we can do to enhance the way we work together, the way we do trade and break down barriers that exist, the better society is going to be.

We need to find ways to bring added value to situations and encourage a business in Sydney to work with its counterpart in business in Bangor.

Q: Who are you selling the Atlantica message to?

A: I'm collecting information from the 1,000 members of Atlantic Chambers of Commerce, and member association like the road builders association and trucking associations.

I will be meeting with government and political leaders on both sides of the border, but it's not about selling them. It's about working with them to identify problem areas and ways that issues can be addressed.

Q: Is it a tough sell?

A: Initially there has been a lot of indifference, even from business. Atlantica has been a lightning rod for a lot of controversy, so some people are wary. They think: What's so weird and wonderful about this thing? There's some cynicism, some negativity and a little less buy-into the need to find ways to co-operate than I expected. A lot of that of that is communications.

We haven't communicated the message of collaboration and working together to reach behind the things we do in our day-to-day lives to improve business and improve the way we go work in the region.

Q: Are the Americans more receptive to it than their counterparts in Canada?

A. Yes. As an example, Jonathan Daniels, chairman of the Atlantic Provinces Chamber of Commerce, lives in Oswego, N.Y. He believes in this so much he is prepared to spend his time and money and to be away from his family to come and work with us to make it happen. There is great enthusiasm with our friends to the south.

Q: I can understand why Atlantic Canadian businesses might want easier access to millions of potential customers in the U.S. Northeast, but why would the Americans care whether they have access to Atlantic Canada and our potential market of less than 2.5 million?

A: I don't think selling us goods and services is the key driver for them. There will be sectors that do, but I don't think our friends to the south see that as the opportunity. They want people to invest there.

We've been a big investor in the Northeast for the last 10 years and they want to see that continue and grow. They need skilled workers, they need venture capital and they need to grow.

Don't forget, the flow of goods and services and venture capital won't just come from Canada. The region called Atlantica will become a recognized global player. It will have a critical mass that will allow it to be on the trade and development radar.

Q: Why do you think there has been such opposition to Atlantica?

We've communicated poorly about what we're trying to do here. Also, with anything that involves change, there are forces in play that oppose it.

Q: Is the opposition to Atlantica based on an understanding of the issues, or has it somehow become a focus for protesters opposed to everything from global warming to social justice issues?

A: I'm not sure why Atlantic has become a lightning rod, but I think it's worth some investigation to try and understand that. The people who have been helping with this, Steve Dempsey, Bill Denyar and other business leaders, they can't understand it either. I've been trying to try to find one thing that we're talking about that is negative, and so far I haven't found it.

Q: Will you reach out to critics in labour who suggest Atlantica will mean a race to the lowest labour standard in the region?

A: The people involved with the Atlantica initiative want nothing more than to work with people who feel there are issues — assuming they have a decision process that indicates they are willing to change and help us guide the change.

It's our job to open up a collaboration process with those with concerns, but there are some people who won't change. They don't want to see change happen.

If anyone subscribes to the view that we need a better economy to grow and support our society, they would be a person I would be interested in talking to. Not just interested, they need to be part of it.

I'm looking forward to an ongoing dialogue with all parties involved that may be different than the last few years.

Q: Some critics suggest Atlantica will simply create a transportation corridor that will run from the Port of Halifax into Maine and beyond into the U.S. heartland without offering much benefit to those along the way. How do you respond?

A: Once we've got the ability to attract product and move it through to market, why wouldn't businesses want to set up here?

They'd they have a supply of raw materials coming past them. They could locate right along the route. They'd have a significant advantage to do business here and grow manufacturing jobs, grow construction, grow and create service jobs to support it all.

With more goods and services coming in, there will be more investment in the region and more business. With innovative thinking, businesses will find a way to prosper.

Q: What's the single biggest misconception that people have about Atlantica?

A: The one at the heart and soul that resonates with people if they feel negativity about it is the idea that we are pushing some kind of "adjoinment" with the U.S. There is no one I'm dealing with that believes that's what we are trying to do.

Q: What is the first concrete step you'd like to see happen that will take Atlantica from a concept to a reality?

A: Peter Vique, president of a very successful engineering company called Cianbro Corp., recently unveiled a proposal for an east-west highway in Maine that could run from Calais to Colburn Gore. The effort would reduce travel time, costs and emissions for the thousands of truckers that travel through Calais daily but are banned from the interstate because of their weight. It would be a toll highway and would cost more than \$1 billion to build, but if this could happen, getting behind that and finding out how to get it done would be the biggest most shining example of what Atlantica is and what we could do to improve our lives.

Q: Why did you take the job?

A: If we can't fix this, eliminate some of the barriers that are now in place, we're not going to see the level of economic growth needed to sustain our society. Our kids are moving away from here. I have three kids. One is in Halifax, and two spend time between Ottawa and Washington D.C. I encourage them to go out and explore the world outside, but they need a place to come back to.

They need to know they can come back here, without being disadvantaged from a prosperity perspective, and have families. I don't want to have to call to Washington to talk to my grandkids.