

Atlantic Gateway

Opening the Gates to Newfoundland and Labrador

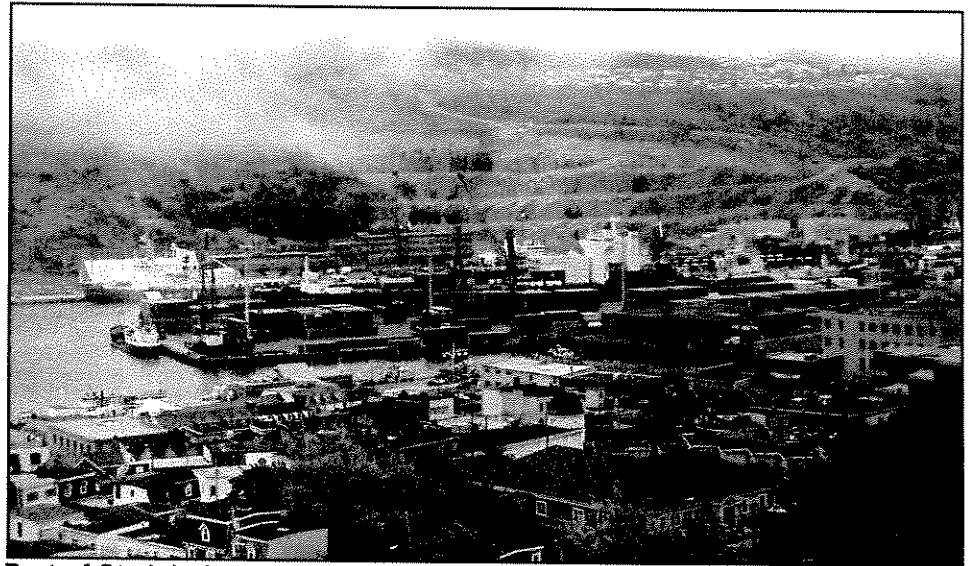
By Clare-Marie Gosse

When it comes to examining the concept of an Atlantic Gateway from a Newfoundland and Labrador perspective, far more questions than answers present themselves. It's unsurprising really, considering people in this province have only just begun to ask those all-important questions. Questions like, what are the implications of an Atlantic Gateway for Newfoundland and Labrador? How can we benefit? Is it a good thing or a bad thing? And for that matter, what is an Atlantic Gateway?

One of the problems with the term "Atlantic Gateway" is it conjures up an image of one, all-powerful hub; a major distribution port linking trade between suppliers in Europe and the Far East, to eastern North America. With cities such as Halifax and New York aggressively pursuing the possibility of becoming that hub, it's easy for a province like Newfoundland and Labrador – which has the disadvantage of being more remote, with a lack of viable road and rail access – to count itself out. But perhaps the Atlantic Gateway shouldn't be viewed as an all or nothing initiative for one jurisdiction – but rather an interconnected system.

Rob Greenwood, a professor with Memorial University's Leslie Harris Centre of Regional Policy and Development, says the idea of Newfoundland and Labrador capitalizing on the Gateway as a system came up as one of the conclusions of the transport forum the centre hosted in St. John's at the end of May.

"I don't think anybody is thinking, if there's a single key gateway port it should be in Newfoundland and Labrador," he says. "More of the discussion by the end of the day was



Port of St. John's

emphasizing the Atlantic Gateway as a system, not a single port, and there's been very little serious work done outside the opportunity for Halifax to delineate what that looks like."

The forum was specifically aimed at examining the impact of an Atlantic Gateway on transportation systems in Newfoundland and Labrador.

"It was the first conference anybody could remember in Newfoundland and Labrador on transportation for years," Greenwood says, "and yet it's such a fundamental component of economic and social development."

Elizabeth Lawrence, Director of Economic Development, Tourism and Culture with the City of St. John's, spoke at the forum, and she says the province should approach the Gateway concept by first deciding what its own importing and exporting needs are.

"Rather than say, how do we connect to it? I think we need to have a better understanding of what is it that we need," she says. "I don't know if any one person has gotten that answer. I think one of the things we need is some kind of assessment."

The federal government has already invested heavily in an Asia Pacific Gateway initiative and announced \$2.1

billion in funding as part of Budget 2007 for further gateways and border crossings. This money will be awarded on a merit basis to enhance infrastructure at key Canadian locations – almost certainly including an Atlantic Gateway, which Prime Minister Stephen Harper has already committed to develop.

Considering Nova Scotia, and more specifically Halifax, has been

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vigourously preparing to position itself as the ideal location for an Atlantic Gateway – and subsequently a large chunk of federal funding – for several years now, it seems almost ludicrous Newfoundland and Labrador has done nothing. Just recently, federal cabinet minister Loyola Hearn criticized the province's lack of contact with Ottawa over a Gateway initiative.

The provincial department responsible for the Atlantic Gateway file is the Department of Innovation, Trade and Rural Development. The department issued a press release shortly after Hearn's comments, countering them by insisting the province has been actively discussing Gateway possibilities. In the release, Minister Trevor Taylor said his department was awaiting the publication of *Transport Canada the National Policy Framework for Strategic Gateways and Trade Corridors*, as well as an ACOA study examining the benefits of a "broadly-defined Atlantic Gateway to the entire region," before moving ahead.

James Frost, Executive Director of the Halifax Gateway Council, a group specifically established to promote growth of the city's transportation sector, says policy is currently being developed in Ottawa to determine how money for a gateway will or will not be spent. Although he says Halifax hasn't specifically requested that funding, he does admit the city is in a strong position. Over just two and a half years, his organization has completed five major projects including a strategic and economic impact study and a vision and action plan.

"We have our agenda and we're pursuing our agenda," he says. "We welcome other people's participation, other people's interest. We'd love to help in any way we can, but we are pursuing our own unique agenda."

Frost says Newfoundland and Labrador would benefit from setting up its own gateway council based in St. John's. Vancouver and Ontario already

have gateway councils and he says New Brunswick is about to create one, too.

Greenwood says it would likely be to Newfoundland and Labrador's detriment if Halifax receives a bulk of federal funding to turn it into a super port, because Ottawa could easily view that as covering the needs of the entire Atlantic region.

"I can guarantee you that's the thinking politically and bureaucratically," he says, "and it's why it's so absolutely essential, if they want to do it right and equitably, to articulate clearly the benefits to all parts of the Atlantic region and to Quebec ... what the Atlantic Gateway system would be constituted of."

Short sea shipping was one of the major possibilities raised through the Harris Centre's forum as a way Newfoundland and Labrador could benefit within the Gateway system.

Bill Stirling, Vice President of the Newfoundland and Labrador Division of Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters, says short sea shipping possibilities need to be researched.

"If there's opportunities for us to do transshipments of large vessels coming to a port on the south coast, or Argentia, or wherever, it's nothing to tranship them on again to smaller vessels that are going to New York or Boston, Georgia."

He adds those same large vessels travelling from Europe and Asia will have to return to their destination ports, so there could also be back haul opportunities for the province to get goods into those regions out of North America.

"If we're positioned as part of a global logistics chain or supply chain then it certainly would help remove some of that perception that we're an isolated, hard-to-get-to kind of place.

"(Atlantic Canada) may need a number of gateway facilities or gateway locations, depending on what the product is and what the market is."

Stirling says if Newfoundland and Labrador doesn't get involved it will be left on the sidelines.

It seems the time has come to stop asking questions and to start presenting answers. The Atlantic Gateway, in whatever form it eventually takes, is almost certainly going to become a reality – probably within a matter of years. As part of the unique geographical confederation of Canada, Newfoundland and Labrador should stay on top of this initiative just as it would any other. The province has to ensure it's cooperatively involved in the creation of an Atlantic Gateway to the benefit of Eastern Canada and the US, while at the same time capitalizing on the economic spin-offs to its own benefit as a self-contained jurisdiction.

The St. John's Board of Trade's President, Cathy Bennett, says the growing emphasis on the Gateway concept is a clear indication Newfoundland and Labrador needs a comprehensive, long-term strategy and vision, outlining its transportation challenges, needs and objectives and how they link to the province's broader goals for enhancing economic competitiveness.

"Gateway or no Gateway, we need to carve our own niche and capitalize on business and opportunities to add value to the supply network in this part of the world."

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