

Build it and they will come

Commerce Shopping is no longer a luxury, developer contends, but an essential service

JEFF DUCHARME
TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL

SAINT JOHN – Like any kid, Troy Northrup wanted to get as far away from his home city as he could just as soon as he could. But something changed his mind and made him stay.

“I started to realize what home really was, what it was all about,” said Northrup.

“I also started to realize the real potential that Saint John has and how many things can really happen here if we can get a community to pull together and work together.”

Northrup now runs East Point Inc. The company’s jewel development is the East Point Shopping complex on the city’s East Side.

The 41-year-old developer said negative attitudes in the city are changing, but he still finds himself frustrated at times.

“We have a tendency to self-destruct. We tend to pull ourselves apart (from) within.”

The shopping complex is still in its infancy, but it already has such landmark stores as Roots 73, Urban Planet, Cotton Ginny, Moores, Fairweather, International Clothiers and Randy River. Soon to be finished is a Hampton Inn – the

first hotel to be built in Saint John in decades.

While multiplexes and ball fields are critical, Northrup said shopping plays an important role in the quality-of-life equation that attracts companies and workers.

“Why would somebody want to come to Saint John, bring their family, set up shop here, only for them to have to go shop in Halifax, Maine or Moncton?”

Shopping is no longer just a luxury, he said, it’s become an essential service.

“People’s lives have changed so much since the ‘60s and ‘70s,” he said. “It’s convenience.”

Last week, Retail Drive was opened. The new road should go a long way to easing traffic snarls on Westmorland Road and McAllister Drive. The \$8-million road takes consumers right to the complex from Rothesay Avenue. Northrup footed the bulk of the bill for the new road and the city contributed \$2.8 million.

And if Northrup and Mayor Norm McFarlane get their way, it will eventually be hooked up to Highway 1.

Such a link, Northrup said, would be a huge boon to retailers and attract traffic

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Developer Troy Northrup, at East Point Shopping, says shopping plays an important role in the quality-of-life equation that attracts companies and workers to a community.

There will be 700,000 square feet of shopping at East Point complex

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that normally roars right by.

“That extra 10 per cent traffic that they may lose from those spontaneous shoppers is the difference between a store making money, break-

ing even or losing money. And that’s some of what we suffer, that extra 10 per cent is too, too important to us.”

In this part of the country, he said, the concentration of stores on the East Side is unprecedented anywhere in Atlantic Canada – 1.6 million square feet of total retail space.

“Most cities would die to have that,” Northrup said.

By the time the project is completed, there will be 700,000 square feet of shopping at the East Point complex.

The completion date will depend on what stores he can attract to Saint John and how quickly.

Home Depot, for instance, took nine years of negotiations.

But Northrup won’t divulge exactly what stores he is currently talking to.

“It’s going to be a full-service centre,” he said.

Along with the clothing stores there will be restaurants, home decor

and general merchandise.

“As a community we need to say, ‘OK, development is good, but not at any cost.’ And there’s certain standards that we need to start meeting for new buildings that go up.”

It’s not about adding more government red tape, he said, but leading by example.

“We don’t do everything right,” he said. “We make mistakes, but our intentions are the best of intentions. I care about the community.”

The example Northrup talks about includes dealing with such community concerns as flooding by using technology that is a first in Atlantic Canada.

Using a geotextile membrane to aid drainage, a specially designed reservoir under the parking lot and a dam headwall that Retail Drive actually sits on, Northrup said flooding concerns have been alleviated.

The complex also has unique touches such as wide sidewalks with a

leather-like, Tex-Mex look, architectural finishes that were specifically designed for East Point and a towering icon that will soon be unveiled and dominate the skyline.

Most customers wouldn’t notice the special touches, said Northrup, but subconsciously they know the experience is different.

“Sometimes (stores) have the same shirts, but you feel different when you go in there. Shopping is about the experience and it’s how people feel.”

For at least one of the current tenants, the feeling has been exceptional. Moores manager Ron Hanscom says sales have soared 20 per cent from its old location and at least one of his district managers has told Hanscom that East Point is the best he’s seen in Canada.

“The business here is phenomenal,” Hanscom said.