

Talk of the towns

Hub community proves location can be a powerful economic tool

By Quentin Casey

Alison Grant pulls out of the driveway adjacent to her office at town hall, taking us onto one of Truro's main streets. Grant, the town's business development officer, has agreed to provide a tour of Truro and some of its leading businesses.

We first pull up to the large brick headquarters of Stanfield's Ltd., the clothing and underwear company that dates back to the late 1800s. We then swing down Prince Street, one of the downtown's main thoroughfares, before passing the office of Truro-founded Wilsons Fuel, which boasts more than 100 gas stations across Atlantic Canada.

There are smaller businesses, too, such as the Pearl & Daisy soap shop. "They ship all over the world," Grant says.

Grant has only been in her post since June. Originally from Truro, she lived in Halifax for five years before moving back last year, along with her husband, Mark, a teacher. "It's home to us," she says.

Grant notes that many of her high school friends have also moved back – a trend that perhaps helps explain the town's growing population. In 2011, Truro had a population of 12,059, up 5.2 per cent from 2001, making it one of the fastest growing regions in

Nova Scotia. (Truro is the largest town and the major centre in Nova Scotia's Colchester County. In 2011, the county had a population of 50,970, up 3.4 per cent from 2001.)

"Our population continues to grow. A lot of communities outside Halifax Regional Municipality have declining populations, but we're a community that is still seeing consistent growth," Grant says. "Our location is a huge factor and is certainly a reason for our success."

Truro sits at the junction of highways leading to Halifax, New Brunswick and Cape Breton, thus earning it the title of Nova Scotia's "hub".



Plus, the town sits in farm country. Dalhousie University's Faculty of Agriculture (formerly the Nova Scotia Agricultural College) is located just outside Truro, in Bible Hill. Bible Hill is also home to Perennia, a provincial Crown agency tasked with boosting Nova Scotia's agricultural business sector.

Perennia, with a budget of roughly \$3.5 million, provides advisory services to farmers on topics ranging

from livestock to horticulture to grape growing. It also houses food quality and safety teams, which are available to audit and consult with agricultural businesses, including those looking to export.

"It's building on the community strengths," CEO Jo Ann Fewer says of Perennia's location just outside Truro.

Though largely focused on agriculture, Perennia is expanding into the fishery sector, with a goal

of helping to double the province's fishery and agricultural exports in the next 10 years. Achieving that goal will involve the creation of new companies focused on drawing new ideas and dollars from the province's primary resources.

Part of that responsibility lies with Richard Ablett, the chief science director at Perennia's BioVentures division.

The BioVentures innovation centre currently houses six tenant companies developing new products. One company is creating biodegradable composite products from vegetable oils. Another is working on natural paints. "You can't buy a can of natural paint at Home Hardware yet, but you will in the next few months," says Ablett, who was born in England and studied in England, Scotland, and the U.S. before arriving in the Maritimes.

Another company, InnoVactiv, is producing a seaweed extract that helps reduce the uptake of sugar into the blood stream. The extract is sold in the U.S., part of the growing health and wellness products industry. "It's a \$200-billion segment growing at eight per cent a year," Ablett says. "This is the kind of stuff we've got to get into. It's not an overnight success. All of these projects take a long time and quite a bit of money to develop."

Perennia, Ablett says, gives companies a chance to add value to the province's primary resources. Tenant companies are provided with lab space and processing facilities to help upgrade their products and develop new ones. Assistance is also provided in pursuing export markets.

"What's happening here in Truro is that we're building an agricultural-bioscience cluster," Ablett explains. "In Halifax you have a life science cluster built around Dalhousie University and it's been successful and it's been evolving for 20 years. This is really the start of the rural agricultural-bioscience cluster."

Adds Ablett: "We think there's a need because the rural economy in Nova Scotia obviously needs an uplift. This becomes the venue where we can do some of the product development that is needed to lift up that economy."

Gregg Curwin peers through a small window into a brightly lit room filled with shelves stacked with

Super power

Millbrook First Nation builds strength via innovative partnerships

If you've driven through Truro on Nova Scotia's Highway 102, then you've no doubt seen the Truro Power Centre. Situated on the side of the busy highway – which runs from Truro to Halifax – the Power Centre is a strip of commercial land managed by the 1,700-person Millbrook First Nation. It encompasses 68 acres of commercial land available for long-term lease.

Launched in 2000, the Power Centre started with a Tim Hortons, A&W, and an Ultramar gas station – all of which were brought in through a partnership with Sobeys. The Power Centre has since added a movie theatre, a Leon's Furniture store, a Super 8 Hotel, an aquaculture site, and a gaming facility with VLTs.

"The Power Centre is a major component in the economic development for the Millbrook First Nation," says Chief Bob Gloade.

Though the majority of its members reside in Millbrook, near Truro, the band also has land in Cole Harbour, Sheet Harbour and Beaver Dam. In Cole Harbour, the band owns two apartment buildings (with more than 100 combined units) and leases industrial space to General Dynamics.

"Our economic development isn't just around the Truro area. We're trying to do it throughout the province," says Terry French, Millbrook's director of commercial operations.

Though not a member of the band, French has overseen Millbrook's commercial operations for two years. Before that he was the band's account manager for more than a decade, at both at RBC and CIBC.

"I would say that Millbrook is

probably the leading economic development band in Atlantic Canada," he adds. "And it would probably be in the top 10 in the country."

Most of the band's business ventures have been developed with partners. For instance, the band partnered with Toronto-based Firelight Infrastructure in an \$18-million wind project that saw three turbines built on band land. Most recently, Millbrook is partnering with Florida's Driftwood Hospitality Management to bring a new hotel to the Power Centre.

The band is also hoping to bring a Canada student loan administration contact centre to the Power Centre, through a partnership with General Dynamics Information Technology. The project, if secured, would create 60-120 jobs in the area.

"Millbrook doesn't have the expertise to be doing some of this stuff by itself. So we try to get into partnerships with people who have the expertise," French says. "We try to provide the necessary capital and the necessary facilities."

The result of such partnerships, French notes, is a huge boost to band revenues. Millbrook's annual revenues are about \$38 million, 72 per cent of which is self-generated by the band. (The federal government contributes \$10 million through various programs.)

The band's payroll totals \$6 million, and each member gets two annual dividend payouts. Payouts for members under 19 accumulate in a professionally managed trust fund.

Concludes French: "Everything we generate from economic development gets paid back to the community members."

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plants. "That's kale on the left. That's baby romaine in the middle," he says.

Curwin's company, TruLeaf, is another Perennia tenant. Started two and a half years ago, the company is working on indoor plant growing systems that use LED lighting, hydroponics, and a special blend of nutrients tailored to individual plant species.

According to Curwin, TruLeaf will soon build an indoor farm for mass-producing its veggies and greens. He hopes to be selling his produce in a "major supermarket" chain by this summer. That said, his effort to push TruLeaf greens into retail locations has been slower than expected.

"It has taken longer, it has been more difficult," he admits while

"It's all very exciting but we've got to get the foundation right first."

Back in Truro, Alison Grant is concluding her tour of the town. We're in the Truro Business Park, home to 70 businesses, including a radio station and a Scotsburn Dairy distribution centre. Grant slows down on a section of gravel road at the back of the existing park. "All the land up there will be part of the new park," she says, pointing to a wooded hill in front of us.

The business park is currently at capacity (a medical marijuana company bought the last available lot and is now eyeing a production facility that could employ 50 people). This spring, new lots will be offered in a 500-acre park expansion.

For Grant, Truro's need for more industrial space is further evidence of the town's growth and ability to attract business. As the business development officer in her hometown, it's a welcome sign. •

FEEDBACK

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"We're as much a technology and engineering company as we are a farming company," explains Curwin, 48. "We've been testing and testing for two years, wanting to make sure the economics of this model work really well."

He adds: "Our yield per square foot is 20 times greater than California."

TruLeaf is funded with \$2.5 million, including money from Innovacorp, a Crown venture capital agency.

touring his company's Perennia office and lab space. "We just really want to get it right. If we launched six or seven months ago, I think we would have made some mistakes."

In addition to retail, Curwin envisions his produce being served in Nova Scotia hospitals. He also hopes to see his technology used to grow plants in harsh areas, such as the Canadian arctic. "It's what we call ultra clean, ultra fresh and ultra local," he says.

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