

Still time to make the decision

You will all have heard plenty about property assessments and mil rates, whether from your personal perspective as a resident or from your business dealings. This is something that candidates are hearing about as they knock on the doors of residents. But business needs a voice on this issue too. And that voice is saying 'don't leave us out when you act on mil rates.'

There is a distinction between residential and business tax payers, yes, but this is an issue for both groups. And because businesses are a collection of people selling products, employing neighbours, and competing both regionally and outside the immediate area, the needs of business have to be included in the discussion.

Most tax payers have limited options in the face of a potentially large increase in their municipal tax bill. Small businesses make up approximately 75 per cent of the Board of Trade's membership, and they would be in a similar situation. A tax burden cannot be placed on businesses without having an impact on their limited resources.

The Board of Trade does have some thoughts and questions on this though. We have grown recently and developed a larger tax base; how does this help meet additional revenue needs? If we spread out the base, let's be fair and have every tax payer benefit from a lower mil rate. Business is happy to pay its fair share, and will continue to, but let's share proportionately in tax reductions.

Also, what broad, big picture St. John's are we spending our way towards? What is the community at large saying St. John's has to be in 10 or 20 years? Is it to be the most environmentally friendly city in Canada, the most recreation-focused, or the city of festivals? These questions are important as the City budget has grown from \$105M in 2000 to just under \$187M in 2009. Population, from 2001 to 2008, grew by around seven per cent in total over that span. The budget grew, on average, more than eight per cent annually.

There are pressures that precipitated this growth, such as aging infrastructure and the need to do things like clean up the harbour. And sometime the province or the federal government will make decisions that influence what municipalities do. Those things must be considered, but the point is that this growth in spending is difficult to sustain.

Maybe the answer is in the on-going North East Avalon Regional Plan work. We applaud the City of St. John's for its involvement in that work and encourage the people driving this process. And there are talks of a City visioning exercise throughout 2010. We applaud them for that and encourage them to do this. The Mayoral candidates talked about visions and plans in our debate earlier this week; collectively, let us come together to support the successful candidate as he leads Council to build this vision. And collectively let's make sure our voices and issues are heard so that they can be a part of the vision.

And while I might have started the column on tax, don't think that's the only issue. I speak for the Board of Trade and it is one issue for us. There are more because we are a community of many people with many views and needs.

In our candidate survey, we asked about a City vision because we think it is important to know what we are working towards. We support a City visioning process. And let me be crystal clear by what the St. John's Board of Trade means by 'we support'. It really translates into 'we want a visioning process and we will be engaged in every step of the process.' I would encourage every reader to be just as involved.

I want to elaborate a little about our involvement on issues of the day. Any time we raise an issue, we do our level best to make a suggestion or provide options. There is no use in being problem-focused. There is use in being solution-focused. Every reader can be a part of the solution as well. Our city will be better for it.