



PLANNING

CANADA

**Ethics and Equity
in Uncertain Times**

**L'éthique et l'équité par
des temps incertains**

An aerial photograph of Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada, taken from the Inner Harbour. A large cruise ship is docked at the waterfront in the lower-left foreground. The city is densely packed with buildings of various heights and colors, extending up a hillside. In the background, a river winds through a valley, and distant mountains are visible under a cloudy sky. The overall scene is a mix of urban development and natural landscape.

PLANNING IN THE ABSENCE OF TRADITIONAL GROWTH

The Story of Saint John, New Brunswick

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AND CYNDI ROTTENBERG-WALKER, MSCPL, MCIP, RPP

Saint John today—a view from Inner Harbour.

SUMMARY Does lack of population growth necessarily mean stagnation, lack of investment or innovation? Can we convince our politicians, economic development officers—and ourselves—that prosperity is possible—and in some cases much more likely—if we stop focusing on growth as the only option for enhancement? This article explores the way one small city moved past “denial” to reinvent its planning practices, celebrating its greatest strengths and proactively addressing its greatest weaknesses.

RÉSUMÉ L'absence de croissance de la population est-elle synonyme de stagnation ou de manque d'investissement ou d'innovation? Peut-on convaincre les politiciens, les responsables du développement économique—et nous-mêmes—que la prospérité est possible, voire très probable dans certains cas, si nous cessons de miser sur la croissance comme seul levier d'amélioration? Cet article revoit la façon dont une petite ville a dépassé cette étape de « déni » en réinventant ses pratiques de planification pour mieux célébrer ses forces et faire face à ses lacunes de façon proactive.

Eighty percent of all Canadians live in cities, and a full two-thirds live in our 10 'super urban regions'. But what about the population that now lives in small towns or in rural areas? Between 2001 and 2006, 25% of Canada's 144 cities lost population, and the pattern is shared, occurring in smaller cities (with populations of less than 152,000) located in the most isolated regions. While urban planning is focused on managing growth, it is just as important that we know how to plan in the absence of growth.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT IN SAINT JOHN

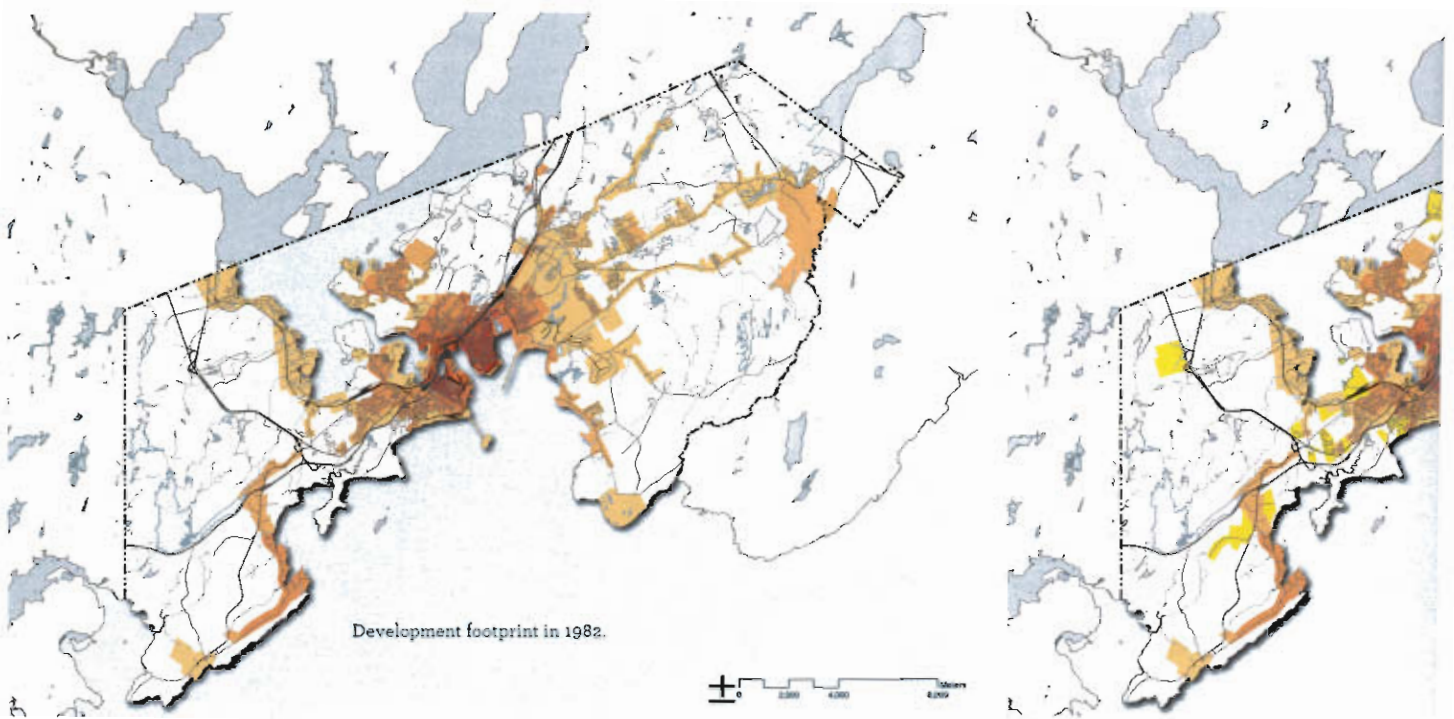
In 1967 the City of Saint John, New Brunswick was merged with the Parish of Lancaster and the City of Lancaster to the west, and the Parish of Simonds to the east. This expanded the city boundary from a relatively compact area of 36 square kilometers to an area of 316 square kilometers, almost 10 times as large. In 1973 a new Municipal Plan was developed, based upon a highly optimistic projection that Saint John would triple in size from a population of fewer than 90,000 to 265,000 within 25 years. The 1973 plan also recognized a requirement for additional commercial areas to serve the needs of the anticipated population growth and recommended that two new 'mini-cities' be created on the edges of the existing city—one in the east and one in the west.

The City's development pattern continued to grow outwards in anticipation of having to house over a quarter of a million people. This very significant increase in size brought with it a strong temptation to 'fill up'

the space. The combination of a large geographic area, aggressive population projections, cheap land, major new roads and highways and affordable car ownership contributed directly to the expansive development that characterizes the city today. As a result, at the same time that Saint John was losing population, it was developing a highly dispersed development pattern characterized by sprawling housing (a significant proportion of which has been built beyond the limit of municipal water and sewer services). Adding to this situation were widely dispersed commercial shopping areas and land-intensive industrial parks on the city's edge. The relocation of the hospital from the urban core to a suburban campus, and development of the University of New Brunswick's Saint John Campus right next to it exacerbated the problem.

THE CHALLENGE

The growth anticipated in the 1973 Municipal Plan never occurred. In fact, the 1965 population of 87,000 was the highest Saint John ever reached, with each



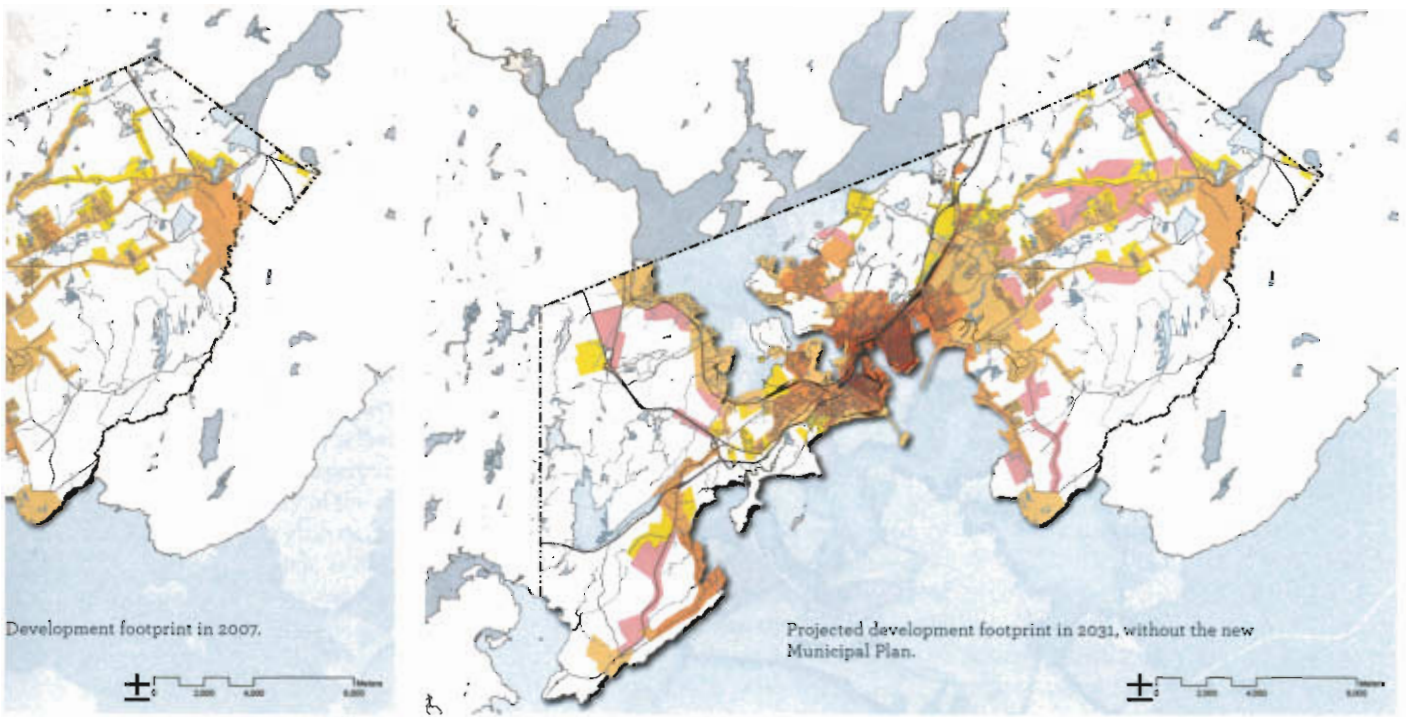
SAINT JOHN FACTS

- > first incorporated city in Canada (1785)
- > 69,000 residents and 48,000 jobs in 2010
- > home to Trinity Royal, a national heritage district comparable to New York City's brownstone neighbourhoods
- > employment centre, shopping destination, and hub for arts, culture and heritage, for the region of Saint John and southwestern New Brunswick
- > largest city on the Bay of Fundy and the industrial backbone of New Brunswick
- > lower unemployment rates than provincial and national averages
- > city of waterfronts: ocean, rivers and lakes
- > home to Rockwood Park—one of Canada's largest urban parks—and Stonehammer UNESCO Geopark
- > heart and trauma centre and the largest hospital in New Brunswick
- > best used transit system in New Brunswick
- > growing cruise port
- > strong industrial base: LNG terminal, oil refinery, pulp & paper, pits & quarry, nuclear power plant and strong and growing service sector
- > growing information and communications technology (ICT), knowledge, advanced manufacturing, energy, healthcare and tourism sectors
- > high poverty and low literacy rates
- > significant disinvestment in the core and five priority neighbourhoods

decade bringing an increasing decline to the current total of 68,000. At the same time, the populations of surrounding communities were increasing. The population decline coupled with the corresponding sprawl meant that every new building constructed on the edge of the city left vacancies behind in the core areas and priority neighbourhoods. This in turn caused significant disinvestment and abandonment of the core. This sprawling development pattern is very inefficient and creates high infrastructure costs paid for by Saint John's taxpayers. The Saint John planning community understood that if left unchecked, this pattern of development would continue to consume more land for fewer people. This resulted in continued strain on the city's already stretched budget to levels that would become unsustainable.

INTRODUCING PLANSJ

While the 1973 Municipal Plan has been amended many times, it was not carefully monitored and had not been comprehensively reviewed for almost 40 years. Saint John Council was committed to making major changes and knew this would only be possible if the community was actively engaged. PlansJ—now in its final stage—was a two-year planning and community exercise to develop a Strategy for Growth and Change, as well as a new Municipal Plan. Through the engagement process, it became clear that new guidelines were needed to effect positive change for their City.



‘... population decline ... within cities has become a widespread phenomenon. The security blanket provided by continued population growth has been removed.’¹

PLANSJ PROCESS

The Plansj process was designed to bring a diverse community together to create the new Municipal Plan, and to have the community become invested in seeing it realized on the ground. Community members were able to be involved throughout the process, simply by dropping by the Project Storefront—or by participating in person or online and at numerous public events throughout the city. This collaborative community spirit included an active Citizen Advisory Committee, and a strong Steering Committee comprising the heads of all City Departments. A committed team of city planners, broad stakeholder involvement, and a bold, progressive City Council positioned Plansj for success.

Although Urban Strategies Inc. was hired to assist the City, and lead the development of Plansj, one of the primary objectives was for the Saint John planning staff and Common Council to be actively engaged in the process of developing the

Municipal Plan. This would enable planning staff to take charge of the process before and after Council adoption of the Municipal Plan. At the same time, it positioned staff to implement the plan, and to assume a leading role in updating the municipal zoning code, as well as in developing future plans with less reliance than previously on outside expertise.

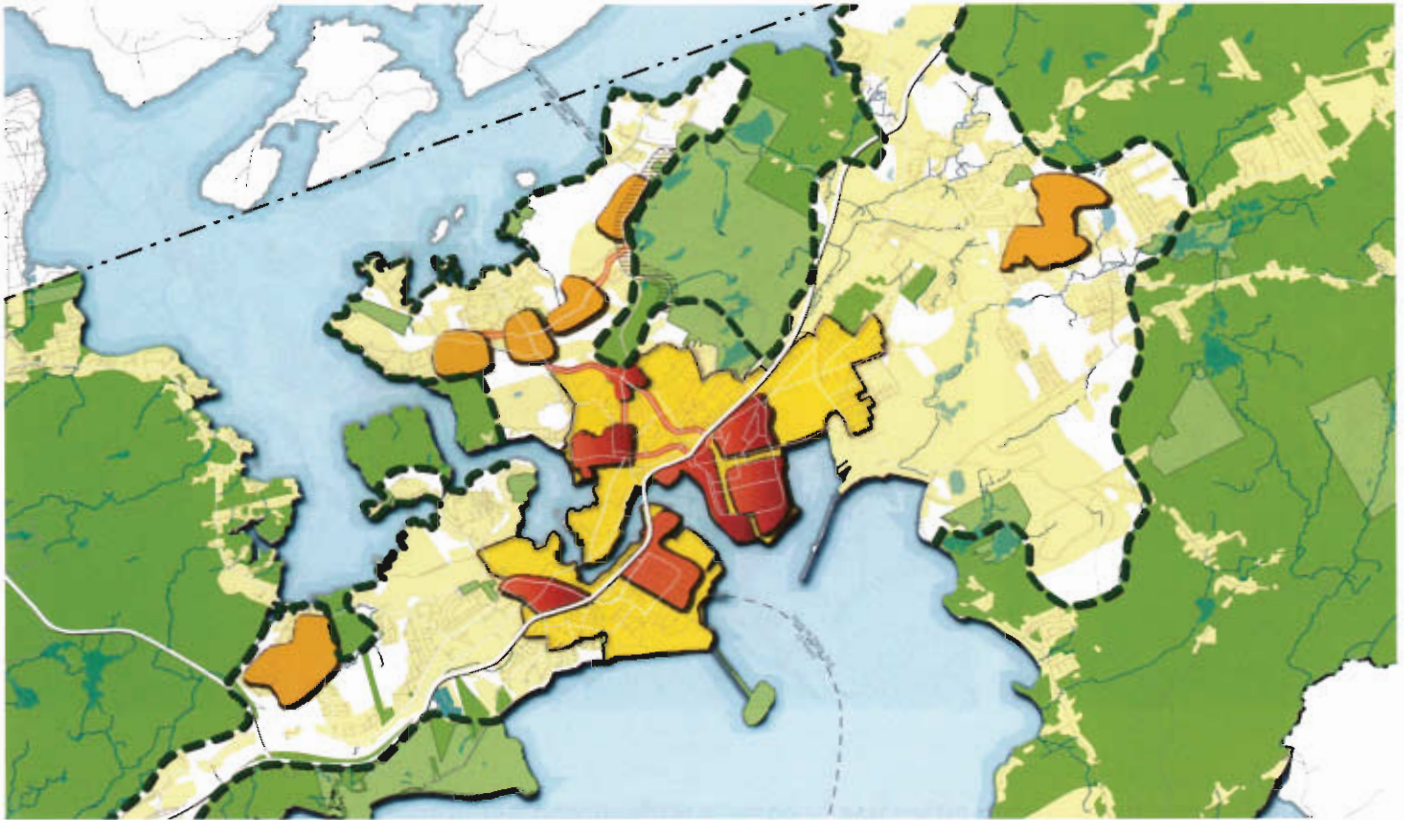
On September 26, 2011, Saint John Council voted unanimously to move the new Municipal Plan ahead by using the required adoption process.

A NEW DIRECTION FOR SAINT JOHN

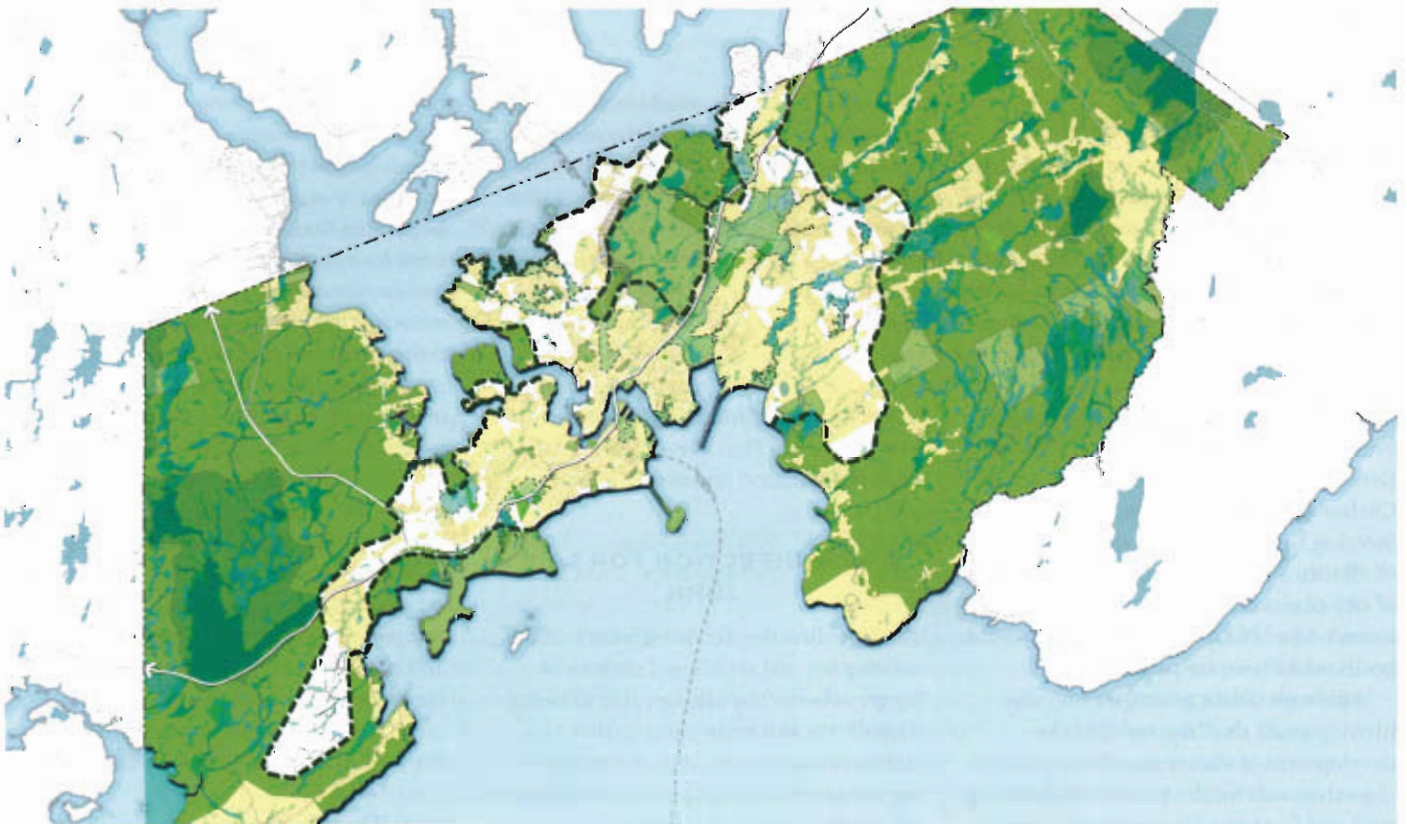
The new direction for Saint John is about moving beyond traditional notions of “bigger is better” by taking pride in being a small city and embracing quality and stability over growth. It is about allocating tax revenues to improve and upgrade existing services and infrastructure before considering the extension or development

of new ones, and freeing up resources for the provision of more visible and beneficial municipal services - like parks, recreation, emergency response and transit. From the beginning Council had highlighted the need for coordination between planning and development and municipal investment by considering the potential for infill development in existing serviced areas and priority neighbourhoods. The *raison d’être* of Plansj: the creation of a clear framework for establishing complete communities, and ultimately, improving the quality of life for all Saint John residents. The new Municipal Plan goes beyond provincially-legislated requirements. It includes policy on un-legislated matters such as city structure, urban design, arts, climate change, and rising sea levels. The fundamentals of the Strategy for Growth and Change are now incorporated in the new Municipal Plan, which establishes the following:

- There will be a slowly declining population until approximately



Orange and red Opportunity Areas inside the Primary Development Area (the bold dotted line) are appropriate places for significant development, whereas yellow and white areas are stable areas where slow, incremental change in keeping with the concept of complete communities is appropriate.



Land outside the Primary Development Area (the bold dotted line) are Rural, Natural and Historic Settlement Areas where significant development is restricted.

“... even more challenging will be to find ways to manage urban decline... to downsize a community to a new and perhaps stable (but much smaller) population... At present, most communities at risk of decline are in a state of denial. This will have to change.”¹

2017. This will be followed by a modest population increase over the remainder of the planning period, provided the community adheres to its plan and focuses its spending on improving the quality of the community. This future growth is based on the assumption that, as Saint John's population ages and retires, new residents can be attracted to the community to fill its many jobs.

- > Systematic monitoring of the plan is required to provide clear-cut accountability. Population forecasts will be updated every five years, permitting the Plan to be amended to accurately reflect a stable, declining or growing population base.
- > There will be a Primary Development Area (PDA) within which 95% of Saint John's future employment and residential development will take place. This will relate to "opportunity areas" in parts of the City that already have piped municipal services in order to leverage the investment that has already been made in existing infrastructure. This will provide a strong framework for change, placing Saint John in the best situation to accommodate any population size.
- > There will be protection of Saint John's healthy neighbourhoods by creating policies that define them as stable yet not static.
- > There will be a focus on the enrichment of Saint John's five priority neighbourhoods and a land use policy that is related to a holistic plan for capital investment in the public realm. Amenities will be created that will improve neighbourhood character and leverage private investment.
- > Policies will be put into place to protect and promote rural lands and the natural environment, recognizing

the roles these play in community health and prosperity.

- > The city will be the hub of economic diversification.
- > A balanced transportation system will be established.
- > Plans will be proactively monitored and clear accountability established. Policy objectives will be put into place to ensure that the Plan is assessed annually and reviewed comprehensively every five years, to ensure that the Municipal Plan remains responsive to the future of Saint John.

CONCLUSION

The challenge for Saint John will be to maintain the momentum that was the basis of the creation of the new Municipal Plan. Current and subsequent Councils must remain committed to proactive change, and to be prepared to intervene on the side of the city when an application that is contrary to the new Plan is proposed. Furthermore, Council must assure that there are sufficient resources to implement the Plan. Saint John staff must make major changes to the zoning and subdivision bylaws to bring them into line with the new Plan. Detailed neighbourhood plans must be drawn up for each of the opportunity areas that have been slated for significant change, and prioritize the neighbourhoods that are most in need. There must be well-designed service plans and a detailed investment strategy in place, and perhaps most importantly, Saint

John citizens must be well informed and actively involved in these plans. This is the key to continued success.

For more information on the very extensive Plansj project and the new Municipal Plan please visit: www.saintjohn.ca/plansj ■

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REFERENCE

1. All statistics and quotes are taken from: Simmons J, Bourne LS. Living with population growth and decline. *Plan Canada* 2007;47(2):13-21.