

The future is now

Colchester County is the geographic heart of Nova Scotia. A rich rural heritage and practical inventiveness is shaping how it taps the creativity of its people

BY STEVE PROCTOR

The blue pickup truck screams along the runway. Myles Tuttle, the manager of the Debert Airport, smiles as the speedometer kisses 160 kilometres an hour. His passenger isn't amused. Jo Ann Fewer, the head of the Colchester Regional Development Agency, has one hand on the dash and the other on her door handle. The ride is bumpier than she expected.

"OK, OK," says Fewer, as Tuttle finally slows down. "We'll get the money for paving—and maybe some driving lessons for you too!"

Turning sleepy Debert Airport into a transportation hub is just one of the Colchester Regional Development Agency's many projects. It's also promoting immigration, attracting new manufacturing, and working to create an innovative life sciences cluster rooted in the region's agricultural heritage.

Most importantly, says Fewer, this is being done by tapping into the strengths of Colchester's many far-flung communities. Residents are successfully being rallied to create and expand businesses that both grow the economy and fight the tide of young people floating from country to city.

As part of that effort, last year \$100,000 was spent patching and smoothing out a short runway at Debert. Tuttle says he's hoping for \$1.5 million in 2010 to redo the longer runway he and Fewer were bouncing along.

With a better runway, and the airport's new ability to supply jet fuel, Tuttle is confident he can lure corporate aircraft. He dreams of the day private jets from Sobeys, Home Hardware, and Tim Hortons are on the ground together as executives check their operations in the nearby industrial park. "If we can attract the planes, we can attract the service industries to support them," says Tuttle. "Those workers will need places to shop and live. Growth will spiral outward."

Debert is just west of Truro, in central Nova Scotia. The airport's roots stretch back to the war years, when much of the surrounding countryside was part of CFB Debert, a marshalling ground for troops headed overseas. The military surrendered the airport long ago, and its hold on its last property in 2003. Today buildings that were once hangars and munitions sheds are home to a flooring manufacturer, a green Internet company, a plastics plant, and several small construction firms. Former military houses have been purchased by young families. They refuse to believe that you have to move to the city to have a good job and rich life.

Tuttle, 25, tried city life with unhappy stints in Edmonton and Ottawa. Homesick, he jumped at the chance to return to Nova Scotia, where he can easily hunt, fish, and go mountain biking. He is especially pleased to have found work at Debert Airport,

A man in a dark jacket and pants stands on a runway with arms outstretched. The background is a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds. The man is smiling and looking towards the camera. The runway is paved and has white markings. The overall scene is bright and open.

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where he learned the love of flying from his father and grandfather.

Trading the driver's seat of the truck for the cockpit of a Cessna 172 belonging to the local flying club, Tuttle recalls one of his earliest memories: soaring over Nova Scotia's Peggy's Cove and Cape Split, then stopping at Trenton for lunch. "It was glorious," he says, revving the engine and heading down the runway. "If I can have a hand in growing this airport, it would be a cool tribute to them."

Beneath the plane's wings, as we trace

the Fundy shore, the ocean shimmers like sequins on a party dress. A blend of farms and forests gives way to homes, small factories, and warehouses in Truro. Tuttle circles over the neatly manicured grounds of the Nova Scotia Agricultural College and nearby Agritech Park, then finds the highway heading to Halifax. The busiest road in the province, its intersection at Truro helps sell the idea that Colchester is a key transportation hub.

There are more farms, trees, and lakes before Tuttle points out the Mastadon, a

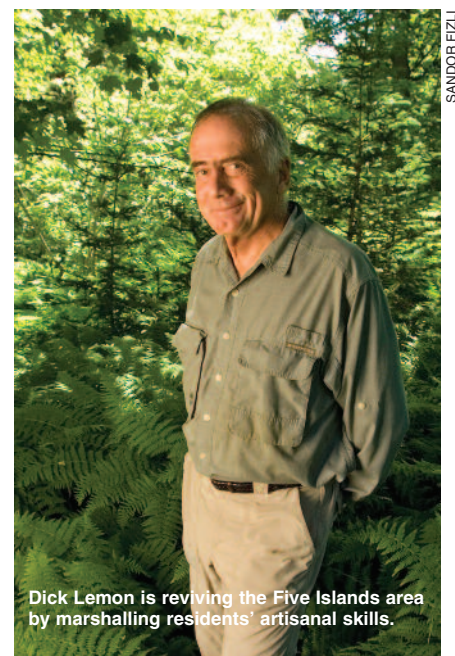
giant model of a prehistoric woolly mammoth that roamed the area during the last Ice Age. It is perched on the hill above Mastadon Ridge, a tourist spot just outside Stewiacke. Plans for a mixed-use business park in the field across from the Ridge were announced last year.

Tuttle wants to complete the tour with a trip over the sugar shack at Sugar Moon Farm in Earltown and carry on to Tatamagouche, but the sun is setting and he has runway painting to check before heading home. "The county is a real study in contrasts," he says, preparing to land. "You've got ocean, forest, farms, the service sector in Truro, and then 1,500 people working in the businesses around Debert and the airport." He laughs as he jumps out of the plane. "And still, when someone asks where you're from and you say Colchester, they have no idea where it is or what you're talking about."

Leap of faith

Seven years ago, Dick Lemon fell into that category. A California lawyer who made a small fortune in the wine business, Lemon, 66, was visiting Nova Scotia when he saw a poster advertising an island for sale off Five Islands, Colchester County. The price tag: \$75,000 (U.S.).

Over dinner one night, he reflected on using the spot as a sanctuary for writers and musicians. By dessert he had decided to buy the island, sight unseen. "It was a leap of faith," says Lemon, "but one that has worked out far better than I could have imagined."



Dick Lemon is reviving the Five Islands area by marshalling residents' artisanal skills.

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“ We could sell produce from Florida or California and make the same profit, but I feel better when I sell local”

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Eric Jennings and his son, Laurie, the incoming chair of the Atlantic Provinces Chambers of Commerce, own and operate the Masstown Market

Initially, it looked like building on the island would be impossible; the rock face was too steep. Lemon persisted, gathering a crew of local workers who spent two years climbing up ropes to camp out as they built a house, several cabins, and stairs to a dock. “It took a heroic effort to build, and I got close to the workers,” says Lemon. “They became my friends as I became part of the community.”

The Five Islands area had long been hopping in summer, dead quiet in winter. Determined to change that, Lemon bought an old restaurant, cleaned it up, brought in a wood-fired pizza oven from California, and opened Mo’s Internet Café. He purchased another abandoned building down the road and partnered with entrepreneurs Eric and Laurie Jennings to open a satellite location for the hugely popular Masstown Market.

Lemon says the only way to fight the

greying demographic along the Fundy shore is to provide young people with opportunities: “Now there are 16 new year-round jobs in the community, a place for people to get a meal or listen to a little music, and nobody has to drive 40 kilometres to get their groceries.”

Community-based innovation

Inside the front doors of the Masstown Market, just where the scent of baking bread teases your nose, is a series of photos tracing the growth of the business. In 1969 it was a roadside vegetable stand; now it’s a year-round operation serving an estimated 300,000 customers annually.

Eric Jennings, 70, and his son Laurie, 44, modestly attribute the success of the store to selection and friendly service. But anyone who has stopped by for a Fundy Mudslide ice cream cone knows there’s more to it than that. You can buy

groceries, have lunch, select bulbs for your garden, and, depending on the time of year, fill your trunk with some of the funkiest Halloween or Christmas decorations in the province. The Market is a community gathering place.

True to its roots, the biggest section is still reserved for produce. Even in February, bins overflow with brightly coloured fruits and vegetables. They are displayed loose, not in bags, so customers can see and touch what they’re buying. “We buy as much as we can local,” says Laurie Jennings. “We could sell produce from Florida or California and make the same profit, but I feel better when I sell local.”

You can buy Dragon’s Breath cheese from That Dutchman’s Farm in nearby Economy, shaved beef and meatballs from O’Connell Farms in Upper Stewiacke, and Just Us! coffee roasted in

the Annapolis Valley. "We believe in the future of agriculture, in this county, and in this province," says Laurie, who recently became the chair of the Atlantic Provinces Chambers of Commerce. "But you have to be innovative. We have not succeeded [to date] because we were happy with the status quo."

That has been a tough lesson for Randy O'Connell. The Upper Stewiacke beef farmer admits that on more than one occasion, he has considered walking away from the farm started by his grandfather. "The feeling passes," says the 42-year-old with a chuckle, as he wraps a package of cold cuts for a customer. "I guess farming is in our blood. We stay for the same

Farms are not only places to grow food but also to grow medicine and the green fuels of the future

reason our neighbours stay. We believe in rural living and the values it instils."

Staying has not been easy or cheap. Beef prices have declined steadily since the BSE crisis in 2002, and at times both O'Connell and his wife have taken part-time jobs to make ends meet. Then two years ago, he decided to risk \$200,000 to build a small processing plant where they can cut and wrap their meat. Now they market it directly to stores that have embraced the "buy local" mantra—stores like the Masstown Market. "People have to eat," says O'Connell. "Hopefully if we stay innovative and at this long enough, it will pay off."

Dr. Richard Ablett, the CEO of the fledgling Atlantic BioVenture Centre in Bible Hill, cheers the local innovation in agriculture. He would like to see Colchester farmers push the envelope even further. An entrepreneur and researcher, Ablett is the driving force behind a proposed 26,000-square-foot facility that would cost \$10 million and catapult the area into the forefront of the agri-food industry. Farms, he says, are not only places to grow food but also to grow medicine and the green fuels of the future.

A micro-factory built at the site already

has resulted in the creation of an anti-oxidant powder from the mash of blueberries left over from making blueberry juice. Work is underway to extract a natural mosquito repellent from the heads of sunflowers. Ablett says that federal financing is in place to support the extraction of an anti-cancer product from daffodils. And he's in discussions with a European company that wants to develop a garlic extract that can be fed to cows to knock out their environment-crippling

methane production.

Jo Ann Fewer, the Colchester County development chief, is excited about the centre's potential. She knows it will move ahead only if the community buys into it. "The key to our success in Colchester lies in our people, in the culture we develop, and in the skills and knowledge we help them acquire," she says. "Any initiative will only succeed when it comes from the people and is embraced by the people." 🌍

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