

Renew PEI: Economic Recovery and Growth Submission

Peter Bevan-Baker, MLA District 17 New Haven-Rocky Point

The following recommendations are based on conversations I've had with constituents and Islanders across the province. While I hear about a multitude of issues which either directly or indirectly impact the economic health of our province, I have focused on three areas that I hear about most often in my own district.

As the MLA for District 17 and Leader of the Official Opposition, I believe these recommendations will encourage a strong and prolonged economic recovery and build a better, more inclusive and resilient province for all Islanders.

Improve rural internet connectivity for all Islanders

Challenge: At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Islanders stayed home to help keep each other safe, with many office workers and students quickly adapting to working and learning from home. The pandemic emphasized the need for all Islanders, no matter where they live, to have access to reliable, high-speed internet. Now more than ever, we must ensure that everyone can stay connected in this "new normal". Regardless of how long the effects of COVID-19 persist, future economic growth and diversity, especially in rural areas, will be utterly dependent on adequate internet connectivity. While it is early on in the most recent contracts that government has signed, it is already clear that the timelines agreed to are completely unacceptable, and a concerted effort to expedite implementation is absolutely essential from educational, social and economic perspectives.

Recommended Actions:

- Immediately renegotiate the agreement signed with Bell and Xplornet to bring high-speed internet to rural Islanders, including moving up the timeline of completion;
- Continue to eliminate the current barriers in the \$10-million broadband fund to make it easier for local ISPs, communities and individuals to apply for funding;
- Continue to lobby the federal government to immediately disburse more funds from its national broadband fund;
- Commit to providing high-speed internet access that meets current CRTC standards to all Islanders by the end 2021.

Build the Island's agriculture sector for a changing climate and marketplace

Challenge: Climate change and the new global economy have had immense impacts on our agriculture sector. We need proactive agriculture policies that help Island farmers adapt to changes in the global supply chain, while also future-proofing farms against the effects of climate change, including changing rainfall patterns and growing seasons, and natural disasters.

Many Island growers have seen financial success in producing and distributing lower-volume, value-added products. These growers are focusing not solely on quantity and competing in the global marketplace, but on creating niche markets for high-value high-quality products. We can build on the successful "Food Island" brand and work relentlessly to associate Prince Edward Island products with the qualities of purity, healthiness and excellence. We can overcome our structural disadvantages of geographic location and size by capitalizing on the historic and inherent ability of Island farms to produce quality products while also protecting the land and water.

Recommended Actions:

- Support growers who are making the transition to new and more diverse crops that are more suited to our changing climate;
- Create a sustainable agriculture funding program to help Island farms offset the costs of adopting technologies such as precision agriculture/satellite farming;
- Offer meaningful clean energy rebates to farms that adopt renewable energy technologies;
- Invest in expanded cold storage facilities to create food distribution and storage hubs, and partner with local producers to ensure the local market is a priority by implementing a 'buy local' government procurement policy;
- Establish a natural disaster relief fund for Island farms that incur damage due to hurricanes, storms, etc.;
- Diversify our markets and shift the emphasis of exports to high-value products.

Redesign the education system to meet individual student's needs and promote creativity and critical thinking

Challenge: The current education system is not set up to address the unique ways that different people learn. We need to rethink the traditional classroom setting and curriculum that currently benefits only one type of learner. Successful businesses these days are looking for individuals

with critical thinking skills and creative minds. Our current system, with its emphasis on a narrow spectrum of subjects and standardized testing, and the relegation of the importance of the arts and social sciences is not supporting or encouraging these emerging skills nearly as much as it should.

We need to find ways to integrate creative and critical thinking into learning as these are essential building blocks for problem-solving and decision-making skills. The current shortage of workers in the trades is destined to be around for the foreseeable future. We can both meet this ongoing need and better support students who wish to follow these career paths by crafting linkages into the community earlier and in a more coordinated fashion.

We must do better at “levelling the playing field” for those students who are disadvantaged by socio-economic barriers, mental health issues and/or learning challenges by identifying issues earlier and providing adequate supports to ensure every student has the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Recommended Actions:

- Identify young Island students with learning challenges early, and ensure adequate educational supports are there for them;
- Make immediate Island-wide implementation of the universal pay-as-you-can school food program a top priority;
- Better and earlier support for students who wish to enter the trades by developing stronger links with colleges, and through expanded co-op programming, technical education and apprenticeships;
- In light of COVID-19, consider opportunities for staggered schedules to better fit the emerging knowledge we have on how and when youth are best ready to learn;
- Establish a curriculum advisory panel made up of key stakeholders including educators, experts, students and parents to review and address gaps in the current curriculum;
- Allow greater autonomy for district advisory councils in choosing how local families of schools are governed and classes are taught;
- Make greater use of outdoor classrooms and opportunities for students to learn in and about nature.