

Landing a really big fish

Reid Southwick, Telegraph-Journal

Published Saturday, June 21, 2008

SAINT JOHN - Irving Oil Ltd. plans to invest an estimated \$30 million to build new corporate headquarters on the city's waterfront, a move that would revitalize the uptown core, company and port officials announced Friday.

The investment plans are part of a tentative deal Irving Oil has inked with the Saint John Port Authority. The deal, expected to be finalized following government approval and public consultations, would see the company's corporate offices located on a four-hectare parcel of land, set back from the waterfront, on the port's valuable Long Wharf property.

The development would include a four-storey building, green spaces and a rejuvenated Fort LaTour heritage site, with construction beginning as early as the fall.

The deal promises to secure up to 1,000 corporate jobs in the uptown area, bring millions in new tax revenues to the city and generate renewed interest in commercial and residential development, said Stephen Campbell, chairman of the port authority.

"Saint John is on a roll and this development will be the most significant in a generation," Campbell told a cheering crowd of business and political leaders at the Trade and Convention Centre.

"It is great news for Saint John's working people and small business owners. It will add critical mass to the city's core and foster the development of our retail, restaurant and service sectors."

As part of the deal, Irving Oil must buy the former Lantic Sugar site from the city and transfer ownership to the port authority. The sale would consolidate the authority's ownership of land along the eastern side of the city's harbour and shift its cargo facilities closer to port operations.

In exchange, the company would own the land on which the building would sit on at the Long Wharf site and lease the surrounding roughly two hectares from the port, at a cost estimated to reach \$10 million over a 99-year lease.

The port would retain ownership and control of its secondary cruise ship berth, while the ground floor of the new building would offer welcome services to passengers.

Conceptual drawings of the site show considerable green space and pathways surrounding a building expected to be designed, built and operated under rigorous environmental standards.

"To build upon uptown means to build upon our city's momentum, on its revitalization and the incredible optimism our city is experiencing," Blaine Higgs, director of logistics with Irving Oil, told reporters during a briefing Friday.

"In many respects, a city's harbour is akin to the doorstep of a home; it is a welcoming port for visitors and a place to make a first impression. We recognize how important it would be to create a welcome place that exemplifies all our city has to offer."

Before the project moves ahead, the port authority is mandated, under federal legislation, to consult the public and various stakeholders on its plans. The deal must also secure approval from city council and the federal minister of transportation. Those discussions are expected to take place over the coming months in anticipation of construction beginning in the fall and lasting for about two years. The development is expected to attract hundreds of new construction jobs.

"We're introducing great opportunities for significantly expanded public access to the waterfront, which has never really existed to date," said Ross Jefferson, general manager of the Saint John Waterfront Development Partnership.

"Equally as important is the effect that up to 1,000 employees will have on the small businesses uptown and the new opportunities for commercial development. We've had developers already tell us that opportunities like this make their investments come to fruition quicker and faster."

Steve Carson, chief executive officer of Enterprise Saint John, told the Telegraph-Journal editorial board earlier this week that securing those jobs in the uptown core was critically important to the lifeblood of the city.

"It makes their team an integrated part of the community, socially, culturally and economically, which, from an economic development perspective, really polishes off that gem," Carson said. "As we all know the future is all about the challenge of attracting and retaining a creative, innovative workforce, and where you are going to be able to do that best in this community? Right on the waterfront, plugged into our galas, shops and boutiques."