

Industry group links energy and economic development

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Policy: Atlantica Centre for Energy eager for public to engage in province's local power markets - which it calls dysfunctional and costly - and create a regional, unified vision

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SAINT JOHN - The Atlantica Centre for Energy is calling for a bold new direction in energy policy in New Brunswick while the public eye is on the issue.



Matthew Sherwood/Telegraph-Journ

Tim Curry, president of Atlantica Centre for Energy, speaks at the Atlantica Centre for Energy board meeting at the Delta Brunswick in Saint John. Curry argues it's time to bring challenges and opportunities to the forefront. "The public is engaged. They have demonstrated a larger understanding of this stuff," Curry says. "Let's use that."

The industry group wants future decision-making to link energy and economic development, considering the province projects billions of dollars will be invested in the sector but energy costs promise to keep rising.

The organization held a board meeting Wednesday in Saint John, where it released five discussion papers meant to inform public debate to selected invited guests.

The group's president Tim Curry, seated in the centre of a board room table populated by board members, addressed an audience of more than 30 in the industry, related sectors and the government, arguing it's time to bring challenges and opportunities to the fore.

Plans for a proposed second oil refinery in Saint John have been shelved; there has been "intense scrutiny" over the drawn-out Point Lepreau nuclear plant refurbishment; the power deal with Hydro-Québec announced last fall is off the table; and industrial firms are taking out advertisements about the high prices they are paying for energy.

"The public is engaged. They have demonstrated a larger understanding of this stuff," Curry said. "Let's use that."

Curry's organization wrote on energy as it relates to economic development; forming a regional vision for sustainability in electricity markets; achieving the full potential of natural gas; making use of renewable energy and new technology; and forming a regional vision for energy.

The group says that though New Brunswick exports massive amounts of energy products - including refined petroleum products and natural gas - the province's local energy markets are "dysfunctional and costly," citing problems with both natural gas and electricity.

One of the organization's 17 members is J.D. Irving, Limited, among the largest industrial consumers of electricity and natural gas in the province.

Wayne Power, a vice-president of the firm, told the audience he believes the status quo in the natural gas market is not an option.

"If we have very competitive industrial rates, that would allow us to grow our current industrial base. And that's very critical for the long-term development of the province," Power said in a follow-up interview.

Still the sector, which creates jobs that pay at least 50 per cent more in wages than the average New Brunswick salary according to Statistics Canada, is poised to grow.

The Department of Energy predicts another \$5.8 billion to \$7.6 billion of potential investment in the energy sector in the coming years: an envisioned second nuclear reactor at Point Lepreau could cost up to \$6 billion; another 300 megawatts of wind power accounts for \$675 million in new spending; tidal energy could mean investment of \$10-\$100 million; and biofuels, solar and other new technologies could spur spending of between \$200-\$900 million, the department's website says.

The Atlantica Centre for Energy is calling for six broad moves.

Creating a common Maritimes System Operator would foster regional energy interdependence, the group says. And promoting the use of natural gas would diversify energy options and drive down costs for those on the distribution system.

Securing lower industrial electricity rates charged by NB Power is a third goal.

Investing in Efficiency NB would allow the Crown organization to promote conservation and demand side management to reduce winter peak demand for electricity and encourage fuel-switching from oil or electricity to natural gas.

A fifth goal of the organization is to focus on continued growth of the energy cluster in the province and region.

And finally, the group wants to engage the public on energy and its role in New Brunswick and in the province's economic development.