

FREDERICTON'S CULTURE OF INNOVATION

Chronicle 1 "Innovation is in our DNA"

Fredericton was founded on a tradition of innovation from the early pioneers to the forefathers who established the oldest university in Canada.

Innovation is in our DNA, it's part of our culture. When we think innovation, it typically conjures images of high tech companies and research & development, but it's in the fabric of everything from our preserved heritage to the design of our streetscapes, green spaces, and art, cultural & recreational amenities.

Being the fourth highest university-educated population in Canada, it comes as no surprise that our universities and colleges continue to produce top-notch talent.

In this chronicle, I'm going to take you on the journey of how we evolved from a sleepy little government and university town to a thriving knowledge-based economy.

It started with a vision to be a 'Smart City'...

Prior to the early nineties, the City of Fredericton recognized that the world was changing at a rapid rate with a widening digital divide. Internet/broadband access was very expensive and only available in large urban centers. This disadvantage had the potential not only to constrain our economic growth, but initiate an economic decline if our businesses did not have the tools to grow. This new form of connectivity was going to be a differentiator of communities in the future, as the concept of 'knowledge industry' was evolving.

In 1992, the City of Fredericton embarked on its journey to diversify from a government and university-based economy to a knowledge-based economy. At the same time, the former Premier, Frank McKenna, was also driving the province's 'Information Highway', so the stars were aligned to embark on this quest.

The City developed its first economic development strategy, Vision 2000, with the mission of being recognized globally as a 'smart city', and to be the Knowledge-based Capital of New Brunswick. We realized that in order to accomplish this feat, some major investments would be required.

Fredericton set out to develop its digital infrastructure. The City Council of the day put innovation at the forefront of its strategic approach, and committed to ensuring residents and businesses were equipped with the best tools to succeed. 'Digital infrastructure' came to be viewed like the traditional infrastructure of roads and streets. We realized that waiting for existing suppliers to "save" us from the Digital Divide was not an option. Something had to be done, done quickly and done by the community itself.

In 2001, the City constructed its own fibre optic network, e-Novations. On the backbone of our fibre, we also built Canada's 1st free wireless network, Fred-eZone, in 2003. We deployed 300 Wi-Fi access points in high traffic areas throughout the downtown and business corridors – lighting public facilities, infrastructure and malls. Today, Fredericton boasts omnipresent broadband service by multiple providers, and a truly connected business community, which enables individuals to connect to the world.



In the future, you will hear about a municipal revitalization project to upgrade free WiFi in high density public domains, and a new brand for Fred-eZone – stay tuned!!

Over the years, we have received countless inquiries from other cities, and have travelled the globe to share best practices. It's safe to say that we have achieved brand equity as a 'smart city' having been awarded numerous recognitions – most importantly being named twice as “One of the World’s Top 7 Intelligent Communities” (2008 & 2009 Intelligent Community Forum of New York). We have also inspired our sister provincial cities to follow in Fredericton’s footsteps, thus establishing global brand equity as an intelligent province.

This progressive, highly visible commitment to innovation has strengthened Fredericton’s value proposition, and carved our niche as a leading knowledge community in the world. It’s why companies want to be here, and why Fredericton has seen some of Canada’s biggest tech deals.

Next time, we will explore what’s happening in the city’s Innovation District, which evolved from a Vision 2000 deliverable to develop a ‘knowledge corridor’ by creating a technology & research park, and leveraging assets like the universities and R&D organizations.

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