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## **Mayor Says Community Engagement Central to Creating a “New Normal” After Pandemic**

*The following letter from Mayor John Higham to Premier Blaine Higgs outlines lessons learned from the COVID-19 crisis.*

May 8, 2020

Dear Premier Higgs:

Re: COVID-19 Recovery and Creating a New Normal

First, I want to thank you for your leadership and commitment during this pandemic. It is clear that New Brunswickers have listened to you and Dr. Russell, and our curve is flattening. All members of your cross-party political team and the all-of-government approach you created, should be proud of how the pandemic has been managed.

I have been pleased to hear you talk about using the innovative solutions and lessons created during the COVID response, to help create a new and more innovative economy and public policy context for the province.

Here in Tantramar, we too have seen extraordinary efforts of volunteers, service agencies, non-profits, businesses, health and education staff, and local governments. We now see extensive food security efforts, children learning outside of schools, increased demand for local produce, on-line purchases from local stores, health services carried out on-line, and extensive use of IT in many new ways.

We noted that much of this was enabled by the new provincial approach to COVID. We saw how the different approach was able to solve issues that had gone unresolved for years., particularly in health. Rural New Brunswick saw how care-hhhome beds were found when hospital beds were needed, and how emergency room visits dropped with doctors and patients meeting on-line. To those of us who felt our rural hospitals were treated unfairly before COVID, we saw confirmation that the decision and policy process was at fault. Once removed from the limited corporate views of the two health agencies, better solutions were quickly found and on top of that, new patterns of use and services emerged.

Following this lead, activities here in Tantramar have created examples and ideas of new policy outcomes that can come from the new framework of the province. We see: community-supported education; community-supported agriculture; community-supported fisheries; community-supported health care -- alongside a huge expansion of the use of IT in new fields. These all have significant regional and provincial benefits and deserve exploring alongside solution-based provincial policy making.

I suggest that there are three significant examples of fundamental changes that should be the base of creating the “new normal” of health and other provincial policies.

First, I urge you to revisit the proposed health summit that focussed on existing management structures and decisions, and modify it to a forum that addresses the lessons of the COVID experiences, and aims to lay out an improved, solution-based, integrated public health system.

Secondly, as we develop post COVID operating environment, I ask that you do not forget the communities. It was the action and commitment of individuals that brought success against COVID, and it was the local volunteers and efforts that kept communities going and cared for the most vulnerable among us. All these efforts around the province have created a new wealth of talent, successes, commitment, cooperation, organizations, and creative solutions—solutions that may not be the same everywhere. These are the features we need to not only create a new normal, but to build a province that can lead in recovery, and in the new economy.

Thirdly, we face huge challenges in economic recovery. Here in Sackville we have a unique education and service-based economy. It is unlike any other community, and to successfully address the underlying issues, we need a supportive regulatory context, supplemental resources, and the ability to define and implement solutions focussed on our needs. I think it illustrates the main features noted above that the “new normal” should contain – a innovative solutions-seeking policy context, and encouragement of local ideas and supports that bring a sustainable supportive future in which businesses and communities can thrive.

I believe we have a chance to put New Brunswick on an extraordinary new path. And that path must involve true partnerships between elected officials, senior bureaucrats, engaged citizens and entrepreneurs. The innovative solutions created during COVID, are now unprecedented opportunities that can drive our communities and province forward. Having witnessed the creative solutions over the past months, I am convinced now more than ever, that rural New Brunswick is critical to the future success of our Province. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss these topics this with more thoroughly. In the meantime, please do not hesitate to get in touch with me directly if you have any immediate questions.

Yours Truly,

John Higham  
Mayor

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