

Grains of sand

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WHAT IF?

BY MIKE LUSHINGTON

Back on Feb. 28, I read a column in the Focus section of The Globe and Mail. It was written by Richard Florida and it was entitled A really new deal would stimulate the economy of the future, not the past. Part of Florida's argument is that both the American and Canadian governments' recent stimulus packages are doomed to failure, despite their almost incomprehensible sizes, because they are focussed on trying to restore what was the past rather than looking to the future. He points out that government policies in the 1930's that finally broke the Great Depression were those that realized that the economy of North America was moving away from one based on agriculture to the one that we know today. However, "what drives the economy today is not the old mix of highways and single-family homes, but new, idea driven industries." On other words, what was the future in 1935 is now the past.

That column brought back to mind a book that my son gave me several years ago. It is entitled The Restoration Economy: The Greatest New Growth Frontier and it was written by Storm Cunningham in 2002. It argues much the same idea as does Florida's column, although in much greater depth. The book has influenced much of my own thinking on the topic ever since I read it, and it comes to the fore again as we begin to weather a depression of our own. I'll not try to reiterate Cunningham's (or Florida's) arguments further in this space; instead, in acknowledging their influence, I would like to ask a few questions.

There has been much talk about government spending on infrastructure projects. Granted that money is going to be spent, what if it were to be spent, for example, in restoring Crown Lands to the Acadian forest it was once instead of in so-called silviculture (read "plantation") projects? What if money were spent in restoring river banks and watersheds to heal salmon habitat and renew the quality of the water itself? What if money were put into purchasing land for the purpose of setting it aside as wildlife corridors across the province rather than further fragmenting what little relatively untouched wilderness we have?

The Olin Chemical Plant in Dalhousie has embarked upon a demolition and restoration project to restore the land that that plant currently occupies. Within a couple of years, that land will be available for other uses. What uses? What is going to happen to the current Dalhousie mill site, especially if no buyer can be found to occupy the current buildings? Does it make any sense for the government to invest money in a demolition and restoration project that just might turn "Front Street" into something attractive and meaningful for a young and vibrant community of 2020 and beyond? What if we began to realize that "make-work" projects that consider a future that is going to be very different from what we are used to could also lead to economic stability, instead of embracing those that can only serve as endless "stop gaps" while we continue to hope for miracles?

I could go on. I realize, too, that it is easy to ask the questions when one does not have to provide the answers. Still, I think that in asking them one initiates discussion. Daring to think about what may be is more rewarding than clinging to what once was, if only because it provides a modicum of hope. What if ..? Indeed, what if?