



MEDIA RELEASE

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RE: Amherst experiencing positive economic news

AMHERST, Nova Scotia – Greg Howell knows he and his brother, Adam, made the right decision when they picked Amherst to be the site of their new restaurant.



Greg Howell places a log into the smoker, while his brother checks on some ribs. The brothers opened Our Backyard BBQ and Smokehouse in January. (Tom McCoag / Town of Amherst)

“The reception from the community is way beyond what we thought we were going to get,” Howell said in an interview conducted three weeks after Our Backyard BBQ and Smokehouse opened in Amherst Town Square on South Albion Street.

“Amherst is living up to being the community we thought it would be.”

The restaurant, which employs six people, was one of two new businesses that opened in Amherst in January. The other was the Art of Rebellion Tattoo Studio on Havelock Street. Their openings coincided with announcements that Frank & Gino’s Pasta and Grill House and the Hart Stores would be setting up shop in Amherst later this spring.

It also came at a time when four of the town’s major employers in the Amherst Industrial Park – Gordon Food Service, Maritime Pride Eggs, Atlantic Windows and Weston Bakeries – were in the midst of expanding their plants. The estimated value of the expansions combined is \$13 million.

Around the same time, Cabinet Central of Burnside announced they would be moving their manufacturing facility into a building in the industrial park that had been vacant for more than a



year, a deal to save the historic, downtown train station and turn it into a restaurant was secured, and new owners took over Bella's Café and Bistro, renaming it Savoie Kitchen.

The Howells' decision to come to town wasn't a snap decision. The brothers, who were born and bred in Antigonish, were living and working in Kelowna when they began thinking three years ago about starting their own business back home in Nova Scotia.

"We did research on all the different towns and counties in Nova Scotia," Howell said.

They looked at population size, cost of living, cost of operating a business in a community and what type of competition they might face. They even looked at the possibility of setting up shop in New Brunswick.

"Amherst kept coming up as the place to go," Howell said. "We haven't regretted our decision to come here."



Adam Howell and his brother, Greg, have been blown away by the reception their new business Our Backyard BBQ and Smokehouse has received. (Tom McCoag / Town of Amherst)

Part of the reason for that is the help they have received from the town, especially Marc Buske, the town's building official co-ordinator.

"It took a little longer than we thought it would to get all the permits we needed, but Marc went out of his way to help us get up and running," Howell said. "If it wasn't for him, I don't know how long it would have taken to get things done here. He literally didn't have to do what he did to help us."

Then there is the reception they've received from customers.

"We're cooking a crazy amount of food," Howell said. "We're very happy with the turnout. On Day 3, we had people lined up out the door. We're cooking 400 to 500 pounds of meat a day."

Lastly, they are impressed with the friendliness of the locals.

"Andrea, my brother's wife, just said the other day that she can't get over the fact every single person she's seen has said hello to her," Howell said. "She's blown away by just how nice people are here."



A few doors down in the mall, Audrey Renwick, Hart Stores' New Brunswick zone manager, is conducting job interviews in a cavernous space that is empty now, but will soon be filled with everything from clothing to furniture to linen to home décor when the new retail store opens later this year.

She too is impressed with the friendliness of residents and the helpfulness of local organizations.



Audrey Renwick, Hart Stores' New Brunswick zone manager, prepares to conduct job interview in the location of the new store the company is opening in Amherst later this year. (Tom McCoag / Town of Amherst)

“What I’ve noticed personally is the people here in Amherst remind me so much of the people in New Brunswick. Everyone is so friendly,” Renwick said. “Even the people coming in for interviews. They are so optimistic. There just seems to be a lot of optimism in Amherst.”

She’s also been blown away by the assistance she has received from local organizations, particularly Nova Scotia Works.

“They were just phenomenal,” Renwick said. “They’re the ones who helped me get all these wonderful applications. They really stepped up to the plate. I was floored by it. I’ve never received so many applications.

“If that is any indication as to what the Town of Amherst is, well all I can say is wow.”

The Amherst location will be the first the Quebec-based retailer will open in Nova Scotia. The company also has stores in Ontario and New Brunswick.

“Amherst is like the front door to a new province for us,” Renwick said. “What attracted us to Amherst is the growth potential of the town and its welcome support for new business.

“When I look at the population of Amherst and the surrounding area it is good. We believe we can give people here a place where they will want to go shopping.”

Renwick said they are currently hiring about 20 people to help set up the store. Once it is up and running, she expects the store will employ 12-15 people.

“We want to become part of this friendly community by creating jobs and by being the best place



to shop,” Renwick said. “I don’t think people will be disappointed with our products, and we are very excited to be coming here.”

Across town on Victoria Street, Andy Farrell is prepping for the supper hour at Savoie Kitchen, formerly Bella’s Café and Bistro.

Farrell, who was born and raised in Amherst, has been in the service industry for 30 years, 20 of them in Ottawa. He moved back to his hometown about seven years ago. Then last summer he and his sister, Donna, learned the owner of Bella’s was looking to sell the restaurant.

“There was some sense, even though I was working, had a good job and was being treated well, that my abilities, experience and knowledge were being underused,” Farrell said. “This was an opportunity to spread my wings, do what I’ve been doing all my life for myself.”

After some discussion, he and his sister, decided near the end of last summer to take the plunge and began the work needed to make an offer to purchase the restaurant.

“We worked together with the Cumberland Business Development Corporation, who were incredibly helpful, in putting together a package for the sale, which went through on the 21st of Dec.,” Farrell said.

At that point, the restaurant closed for a few renovations, including a new bar, a new paint scheme and new furniture. They reopened with a new name – Savoie Kitchen – and a new menu on Jan. 9.

“Savoie is my late mother’s maiden name,” Farrell said. “She was the kind of person who opened her home to everyone. As far as my siblings go, all our friends essentially lived at our house. Most people just called her Mom.

“That fits in with the ethos of what we’re trying to do here, which is to provide a comfortable space where everyone is welcome, to provide homemade food at reasonable prices.”

Farrell is confident the restaurant will succeed.



Andy Farrell and his sister, Donna, opened Savoie Kitchen, the former Bella's Cafe and Bistro, to rave reviews. (Tom McCoag / Town of Amherst)



“Knowing what the market is like in the food industry, the fact I know the job and we are poised to offer, in terms of our menu, people something different ... I thought those things, along with the welcoming atmosphere in town was a recipe for success.”

The town has been very supportive in “terms of promoting our business,” he said. “Rebecca Taylor (the town’s business development officer) has been instrumental in getting us involved in things like the Winter Carnival and the French Toast Fest.”

The positive attitude circulating throughout the town is another reason he believes the restaurant will be successful.

“When I see the way Victoria Street looks in the summertime, I am encouraged that the town is not just functioning as a municipality, but that it’s making an effort to make this place look and feel good to visitors and the people who live here,” Farrell said. “I’m proud to own a business on Victoria Street. I think the town takes great pride and care in the way the community looks, and that reflects well on all of us.”

As far as business is going, he said it’s been “far, far beyond our expectations.”

Over on Industrial Park Drive, construction workers are busy at Gordon Food Service building a 45,000 square foot expansion to the 16-year-old facility.



One of 40 businesses in the Amherst Industrial Park that together employ more than 1,200 people, the food distribution company arrived in town in 2003.

“We decided to build in Amherst because it is the ideal location for distribution across the Maritimes,” said Cam Godin, president of the Atlantic Division of Gordon Food Service. “If you look at a map, Amherst is the perfect distribution point. In our business it is important to hit the key markets at the right time. When you are distributing out of Amherst, it’s ideal.”



Work on the expansion of Gordon Food Service began last summer and is expected to be completed later this spring. (Tom McCoag / Town of Amherst)

It’s been so ideal, the company decided their Amherst expansion was required “in order to continue to grow the business across Atlantic Canada,” Godin said.



“We’ve grown exponentially over the years since 2003, probably to the tune of being four to five times larger than when we came to Amherst.”

The expansion, which is predominantly new freezers and coolers, “gives us a nice platform for growth” and it will impact employment, he added.

“When we opened, we had 50 employees. Now we have over 200,” Godin said. “Our goal is to have more employees as the business continues to grow.”

The town, Godin said, has been very helpful along the way ensuring the business received the proper permits and answering questions in a timely fashion.

“They’ve been excellent to do business with,” he said. “In fact, the entire community has been fantastic. They’ve exceeded our expectations. We’ve had tremendous success finding some great employees. It’s been a joy to work in that community.”

Gordon Food Service expects the work on the expansion to be completed in late April or early May.

A couple of blocks over on Chandler Road, the employees at Atlantic Windows have already moved production lines into a 22,500-square-foot expansion that was added onto their 44,000- square-foot manufacturing facility.

“We decided to expand because business is good and Atlantic Windows continues to grow,” said Greg Dickie, company president. “We are distributing our products throughout Atlantic Canada. We’ve done business in States, Ontario and the Caribbean. We’re always getting opportunities to grow beyond our boundaries. We want to be prepared for that.”

Like Gordon Food Services, the 36-year-old company that is headquartered in Port Elgin, N.B., established a production facility in Amherst 11 years ago because the town’s strategic central location in the region gave them access to all the Maritime provinces and a straightforward route to Newfoundland.



An Atlantic Windows employee builds a door inside the new 22,500-square-foot expansion the firm built on their Amherst plant. (Tom McCoag / Amherst Bureau)



“We did a lot of analysis, looking at demographics, statistics, unemployment rates,” Dickie said. “Of all the places throughout Atlantic Canada, the Maritimes, Amherst was No. 1 on our list after all that analysis.”

Amherst was also a natural fit, he added, because it is just 25 minutes away from the main plant in Port Elgin where the firm produces its windows. The Amherst plant builds all the firm’s swing and sliding door entrance systems.

The expansion in Amherst comes three years after the firm built an 11,000-square-foot expansion to their Port Elgin plant.

“We’re committed to both communities,” Dickie said.

By building onto their Amherst plant, the company has been able to install two additional entrance system lines – PVC sliding and swinging doors – in the plant. This, the company president explained, took pressure off the Port Elgin plant and enabled the firm “to increase our capacity across all our production lines, which makes our operations even more efficient.”

The Amherst plant currently employs about 50 people. Dickie expects that number to grow to 75 thanks to the expansion.

Dickie said the Town of Amherst has been very inviting and helpful, both when they came to the town and when they decided to expand.

“They’re definitely open for business,” he said. “As far as construction goes, we never had a hiccup in getting permits or inspections. It was a real team effort with the town.”

The community, he added, has also been very welcoming.

“We feel like it’s our second home. The ease of hiring new people, we never have issues trying to fill a position. The people are just amazingly hard working. They take a lot of pride in what they do, and they want to make things better.

“It’s been a great experience, the last 11 years, and will be for years to come.”

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