

HOLYROOD'S *cold ocean of dreams*

Some in this small Newfoundland and Labrador town think the Oceans Holyrood Initiative is a pipedream. Not Gary Corbett. He thinks it's the future

BY ALEC BRUCE

It's only half-past ten in the morning and it's already one of the worst days Gary Corbett can remember. The COVID-19 virus had hit the tight-knit communities of the Avalon Peninsula like, well, any virus hits tight-knit communities anywhere: efficiently, remorselessly. The day before, the provincial government had sent 3,000 workers home to self-isolate. No school. No sports. No gatherings of any kind. Worse, for Corbett, no business. Now, on a frigid February morning at his home in Holyrood, Newfoundland and Labrador, he sits waiting for the phone to ring and hopes his cell signal holds up.

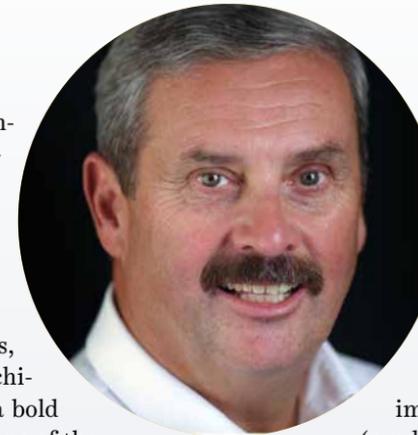
"I've been better," says the chief administrative officer of this bedroom community of St. John's, situated at the head of Conception Bay. "What with COVID, I'm trying to work from home, and I can't get access to the stuff I need. I'm having trouble getting anything done."

That's important. For the past 11 years, Corbett has been, arguably, the main architect of the Oceans Holyrood Initiative, a bold scheme to turn this village of 2,400 into one of the world's great centres for marine research and economic development. Apart from today, not getting things done has rarely entered his mind. The evidence of his handiwork is plain to see.

Over there, down by the shore, the 20-acre Stores at Holyrood bursts with shops and barks for more. Across the way, up the hill, BeachHead Innovation Centre beckons to the world's technology entrepreneurs: "Come ashore, come ashore." Meanwhile, Blue Ocean Innovation Valley industrial park seeks warehousing, fabrication, and manufacturing businesses willing to sink bricks and mortar roots into 1,000 acres of "prime land" by pristine Atlantic waters. And in the centre of it all—at the physical and figurative heart of the tiny community—Oceana, the home of Memorial University's Marine Institute.

All of it has been built to welcome the world and, in the process, launch Holyrood into a new age of untold opportunity and prosperity. Or, so says Corbett, who points to Oceana as the lynchpin fastening everything together.

"Think of it as the Woods Hole of the north," he says, comparing it to the world-famous oceanographic research centre in Falmouth, Massachusetts. "That's probably the leading place of its kind in the universe. But, it's in what I consider warm water, whereas Oceana experiences a much harsher climate at the southernmost point of the Labrador Current. So, there's no reason why we can't become the international leader in cold-ocean R&D right here in this little town."



BRIAN CAREY

Opposite page: The Memorial University Explorer autonomous underwater vehicle (AUV) rests in the evening sun after a day of instrument testing in the waters of Holyrood Bay. Inset: Gary Corbett, CAO of Holyrood.

In fact, he—and the town's council, which supports him—may be on to something. Cold-ocean research is at the leading edge of what the Paris-based Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development calls a hugely promising international industry. "Calculations of the global ocean economy's output in 2010 value it at \$1.5 trillion (US), or approximately 2.5 per cent of world gross value-added (product GVA)," it stated in a 2016 report. "Direct

full time employment in the sector amounted to around 31 million jobs in 2010."

What's more, the group said, "Looking to 2030, many ocean based industries have the potential to outperform the growth of the global economy as a whole. Projections suggest that the sector could more than double its contribution to global value added, reaching over \$3 trillion, and [generate] 40 million full time equivalent."

None of which has been lost on government policy makers who have set aside millions for investment in an East Coast cold-ocean sector that could, for a change of economic pace, generate billions over the next decade. "The Ocean Supercluster will tap the combined strengths of the industries operating in Canada's oceans, including marine renewable energy, fisheries, aquaculture, oil and gas, defence, shipbuilding, transportation and ocean technology," says the program's description on Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada's website. "By harnessing emerging technologies, this Supercluster will optimize marine operations, maximize sustainable approaches to resources, and increase safety in marine environments."

Certainly, Holyrood's various initiatives regularly benefit from access to the public purse. Most recently, the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency and the Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Tourism, Culture, Industry and Innovation joined hands to distribute a total of \$7.5 million to expand an important piece of marine infrastructure in



CONTRIBUTOR PHOTO



DEPARTMENT OF FISHERIES AND OCEANS

Far left: A historic wood engraving entitled *Hauling capelin bait at Holyrood, Conception Bay (1887)*. Left: Marine Institute technical personnel working with the Explorer AUV.

Holyrood. But although Corbett acknowledges that ACOA and the National Research Council are “partners” in the town’s reformation, he says they are not leaders. The leadership, he says, comes from the town. It has to.

“One of the big goals of various councils that I’ve worked with over the years, and a strong piece of my own thinking, is how to make a small community like Holyrood sustainable,” he adds candidly. “Holyrood had become a sleepy town. It had become a senior citizens’ town.”

During its earliest days at the beginning of the 19th century, of course, the community evinced a downright entrepreneurial attitude towards the sea that surrounded it. Like most outports on The Rock in those days, only grit, ingenuity and faith separated folk from daily disaster. According to a local history of the town by Mary Veitch, published in 1989: “The fishery was the focus of economic development, [but] because Holyrood was so far in the bay from the inshore fishing grounds...the focus was on the Grand Bank, Western and Labrador fisheries which drew most men from the settlement each summer and the seal hunt during the spring. Caplin and squid were plentiful in Holyrood harbour and contributed substantially to the local [bait] industry.” At one point, the summer capelin “roll”—where countless silvery fish crowded near the shoreline to spawn—drew thousands of tourists and people from across the province.

After the arrival of road and rail, however, Holyrood evolved into a so-called “dormer community” of St. John’s, only 40 kilometers away: more interested in serving the capital region with nice homes, picturesque vistas, and essential services and less inclined to forge its own economic and social opportunities.

“We all know that in order to grow a small municipality, you have to have access to residential and business taxes,” Corbett says. “If your businesses are not growing and new businesses are not coming, and your residents are aging, it’s very challenging to tax them further to cover off the services that are required.”

Or, at least, that’s what occurred to him almost from the day he took the town’s CAO job in 2009. The observation wasn’t entirely professional, either. Born in Toronto, his parents, who were from Newfoundland and Labrador, moved back with him in tow when he was four, when his peripatetic love affair with small communities in the province fairly began. “I went K through Grade 9 in Holyrood, Grades 10 and 11 in Avondale, and I completed Grade 12 in Corner Brook,” he says. “I attended Memorial University and graduated with Bachelor of Education, Bachelor of Physical Education and a Masters in Physical Education.”

After 30 years as an elementary school teacher, principal, and program specialist in physical education, he looked at his hometown and found it, not surprisingly, just a tad undisciplined, just a wee bit flabby. “We had to become sustainable,” he says. “And having a real vision to do this was crucial.”

The vision began with a conversation. In 2009, Glenn Blackwood, the first vice-president of Memorial University and, for several years, the head of the Marine Institute (MI) in St. John’s, planned to build a base in Holyrood. It seemed the ideal location: sheltered yet accessible to the open ocean; close to the province’s main city and biggest centre of learning. What’s more, the new scientific venture could be a catalyst for new start-ups and investment capital. He was keen to know what Holyrood’s new CAO thought. “He wanted to

Marine Institute technical personnel inspect a SmartAtlantic oceanographic buoy on board the Institute’s vessel *MV Inquisitor*. MI developed and has operated the SmartAtlantic buoy network since 2006.



update me on his ideas,” Corbett recalls. “He laid out what the strategy was and it was pretty clear that the municipality had to decide how it could fit in; how it could complement the MI’s plans and how we could benefit from that.”

Later, Blackwood would say in a strategic review of the MI that his crew possessed a certain “uniqueness” which set it apart from other institutes of higher learning. For lack of a better word, “teamwork” was its best asset—that, and its eagerness to work with industries and communities. Following the base’s launch, he told *Natural Resources Magazine*, “We currently house our Centre for Applied Ocean Technology (CTec) at Holyrood and as such, these facilities are a major part of the Marine Institute’s on-water assets. We are also directing more of our safety and survival training there and are looking to expand our footprint in the town over the next 5-10 years. The town has been incredibly supportive, has a strong focus on the ocean sector and is a pleasure to work with.”

The admiration went both ways. And so did the work. The Marine Institute seemed to have a rock-solid *raison d’être*. For town officials, though, the big question was: If Holyrood built something, anything...who would come? “We started a whole lot of processes without really knowing what the future would be,” Corbett says. “But we had a pretty good idea there was a tremendous opportunity here, somewhere. We just had to figure it out.”

They also had to get out of town and see a bit of the world they were determined to host. “We really needed to find out about oceans,” Corbett admits. “We really needed to see what was happening out there. So, we attended conferences and met with people in the United States, England, and Ireland. We dealt with others in places like Australia and Greece. The great thing was we discovered that there really was a need for a cold-ocean research centre and hub.”

The less encouraging news was that almost nobody thought they could do it; at least not anytime soon. “They all thought

it was a tremendous concept,” Corbett says. “But most didn’t think it could be done in less than 20 or 30 years. Well, here we are: We’re ready in less than 10.”

Perhaps, but even the town’s indefatigable CAO admits Holyrood still has some way to go before it begins to see the full measure of its drive towards self-sufficiency. Despite hosting the town’s first, true-blue partner, the Marine Institute, Oceana has taken time to get on its feet. “It’s on the cusp of developing this year,” Corbett says. “The infrastructure is close to it and we are going to have our first two companies there. We’re also

in a key position to assist various opportunities that will take place under the guidance of the Marine Institute.” But, he adds, “We have lost several companies because we weren’t ready. That’s been a problem since day one.”

Another problem has been generating an authentic groundswell of enthusiasm among the locals. While some have been involved at the council and committee level, and none appear to reject the scheme outright, most still think it’s just a pipedream. “Nobody has come out with a negative slant, but most people don’t really understand,” Corbett says. “They think it’s too far down the road.”

“But I say you won’t even be on the road if you don’t make your community sustainable. It’s just about explaining it. We just have to do a better job of communicating that to people at each opportunity.”

Of course, some opportunities are better than others. “COVID!” Corbett’s almost hissing now. It’s closer to noon and the news isn’t getting any better. “I definitely don’t think this will be over in two weeks. Yesterday, we had seven new cases. We have over 250 active right now.”

Still, he says, “We’re going to get through this. People are concerned, but this will be over and we’ll move forward again. I’m not going anywhere.”

Actually, he is and so, likely, is Holyrood. Just, maybe not today. 🐸

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