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FedNor: who calls the shots matters

By: Charles Cirtwill

What's the first thing people normally do when the person on the other side of the counter can't or won't give them the level of customer service they desire? They ask to speak to the manager. They want to know that the person they are talking to has the power to not only identify a solution, but to implement it.



Charles Cirtwill, President & CEO, Northern Policy Institute.

It is the same in the realm of economic development and local investment by the federal government. If a municipality or a small business wants a unique solution to a unique problem they want to sit across from the decision-maker and make a deal.

In Atlantic Canada, you can do that in cozy offices in Moncton. In Western Canada, you can do it in Edmonton. In Southern Ontario, it's Waterloo. To do that in Northern Ontario you would likely have to head for Ottawa.

The Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario (FedNor) is the only federal regional economic development "agency" that isn't truly an agency of the federal government. Western Economic Diversification Canada is officially an agency of the federal government. So is the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA). So is the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario. FedNor is just a program of Industry Canada.

So what, you say? FedNor is successful, it has a huge impact here, it spends oodles of cash – why do we care that it isn't the same, technically, as its sister organizations across the country?

This difference matters. First off, it limits who FedNor itself gets to talk to in Ottawa.

The Treasury Board Secretariat, the pinnacle of public service power in this country, has a list of agencies it deals with directly. ACOA is on that list.

Western Diversification is on that list. FedDev is on that list. FedNor is not.

Being an independent agency also allows FedDev and the others to invest more and do it faster than FedNor can. True development agencies can change direction quicker and more easily respond to unique local opportunities as they arise.



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Economic development in the modern age is about regions – investing in them, growing them, and making them unique. Who is best to decide how to maximize our region’s competitiveness? A policy writer in a tower in Ottawa, or a program officer on the ground in Kapuskasing?

Of course, we have heard all this before. There have been many calls to make FedNor more independent. But what better time to repeat those calls then during an election year?

In a recent paper, Charles Conteh does just that. He suggests several changes to FedNor that the government to be elected this fall should take very seriously. He believes that FedNor should:

Be restructured to allow for greater operational discretion and autonomy from Industry Canada.

Abandon project-centric approaches in favour of a smaller number of larger investments designed to build the capacity for value-added and knowledge-intensive economic clusters.

Adopt the Growth Plan for Northern Ontario as the policy framework for the region (for all of its flaws, the Growth Plan at least is a clear framework for collaboration and action).

Sign a formal five-year partnership agreement with the provincial Ministry of Northern Development and Mines and the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund for larger investments that support emerging priorities targeted in the Growth Plan.

Finally, he argues that because Northern Ontario is not one homogenous region, the partnership agreements should focus on supporting five regional economic zones or subregions.

These economic subregions should be a partnership with the region’s five major cities and their surrounding communities to co-ordinate the development and delivery of economic development programs. On this final point, I diverge with Dr. Conteh. I think there are more than five economic subregions here in the North, but that’s a subject for another column.



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