

University plays key role in 'Saskaboom'

Thanks to two new research facilities, the University of Saskatchewan is helping to transform the province's economy

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SASKATOON -- More than 5,500 academics descended on Saskatoon last week for a conference at the University of Saskatchewan.

The cab shortages they created made the local front pages and the money they spent caused at least a few shop keepers near the hotels on Spadina Crescent to linger after their usual 6 p.m. closing to allow for souvenir shopping.

The conference attracted national coverage and brought visitors to a city that in the past they had only flown over on the way to somewhere else. It is a perfect example of the role the university plays in its community, bringing jobs, money, people and attention to this city of 230,000.

These are heady days for the people of Saskatoon. The city is experiencing increased prosperity and the university is enjoying a boost in its stature thanks in part to two major new research facilities. It is home to Canada's only synchrotron - a \$170-million sophisticated light beam that allows researchers to examine matter right down to the level of the atom - and the planned International Vaccine Centre, set to open 2009.

Many see the prosperity of the city and the rising profile of the university going hand-in-hand.

"Saskaboom," that's what they are calling it, said Dale Botting, chief executive officer of Saskatchewan Trade and Export Partnership and a native to the province who returned from Central Canada, another increasing trend. Last year, for the first time in more than two decades, the province saw a steady increase in its population. Gone is the old talk of who will be the last one left to turn the lights out.

Like its western neighbours Calgary and Edmonton, part of Saskatoon's rising fortunes come from increasing demand and prices for natural resources, including the province's huge reserves of potash and uranium.

But there is another story taking shape around the University of Saskatchewan and the profile it is developing. "The university has been an incredible engine in all this, absolutely," Mr. Botting said.

The University of Saskatchewan, with its stone buildings and wide green lawns, makes a striking first impression. It is also a study in contrasts. Barns and grazing cows are just a

short walk away from the main campus, a major research park and Canadian Light Source, the university's synchrotron facility.

University president Peter MacKinnon, a native of Prince Edward Island who is the former dean of law and was short-listed for a Supreme Court appointment, says the combination of so many academic disciplines on one campus is a large part of the university's appeal.

The campus, which has about 15,000 full-time students, is the only one in Canada to include a medical, veterinary and agricultural school. (There are also faculties of law, pharmacy and dentistry and well-regarded engineering and science programs.)

Mr. MacKinnon said this fact was one of the reasons the university was chosen as the site for the new vaccine centre since so much of the emerging research in this field is taking place at the point where plant, animal and human life intersect.

It also was a factor in attracting the synchrotron facility, which can be used by researchers in a wide range of disciplines.

Mr. MacKinnon, who often stops on the short walk from his office to the faculty club to chat with visiting academics, members of his staff and retired professors, is comfortable in his role of goodwill ambassador for the university. A big part of his job now, aside from securing long-term government funding to operate the new facilities, is to bring leading researchers and faculty in all disciplines to the campus. In this respect, the arrival of the annual Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences was a perfect chance to do some informal recruiting.

Mr. MacKinnon said getting two international calibre facilities on campus represents a "fundamental change" at a time when staying the same was not an option. "We had a choice of attracting projects and playing a part on a global scale or being reduced, weakened and diminished."

He also is acutely aware of the role the university can play in diversifying the provincial economy beyond resources and agriculture and in improving the fortunes of the people of the province, particularly native communities. The boom, with its skyrocketing housing prices, is also creating a growing divide between haves and have-nots and raising concerns about a range of issues including its effect on the environment.

"It is welcome, but it has its issues, too," he said.

The scale of the university's influence in the current boom is difficult to gauge.

The most recent study was done in 1999, before the surge in the resource sector.

It estimates that the university and its related facilities, including its research park, account for about 20 per cent of the income in the city and about 18 per cent of its jobs.

Murray McLaughlin, director of business development for Canadian Light Source, said it's too soon to say what the economic effects of the facility will be in 2012, when it is running at full capacity. The Saskatoon synchrotron has set aside one-quarter of its time for use by industry, more than double what is available at similar sites around the world.

A rough estimate suggests that could result in between \$5-million and \$10-million in annual revenue, not to mention the related benefits to a city of well-paid academics and private researchers coming to live here or for short visits.

Back at the faculty club, Mr. MacKinnon, who is married to a former provincial finance minister, says the fate of the university and the provincial economy have been intertwined since the first courses were offered in liberal arts and agriculture a century ago. He is just carrying on that tradition on a broader scale, along with the province's other university, the University of Regina.

"The province needs the university to be highly successful and we have to be highly successful," he said.