

## **Volunteers sign up in droves for economic-development initiative**

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The provincial government's new business ambassador program has proven popular.

Business New Brunswick Minister Greg Byrne announced earlier this week that he wanted to recruit 100 volunteer business ambassadors in 100 days.

Byrne said Friday that goal has been reached already.

"The uptake on that program has just been incredible," he said in an interview. "We announced that program three days ago and we have already exceeded the target."

The government wants the volunteer ambassadors to open doors to new business prospects for the province.

The plan is to set up a database and provide the ambassadors with an information kit about the province.

"People have heard about the program," said Byrne.

"They are excited about it ... We are getting calls from everywhere. My Blackberry has been just buzzing steadily," the minister said.

He said it shows there's a lot of goodwill in the business community and people are excited about self sufficiency.

"We have had a lot of contact from outside the province as well," said Byrne.

"I had two or three people contact me who said they had learned about the program from (former Liberal Premier) Frank McKenna."

One of those people is Lorne Abony, president and CEO of Toronto-based Fun Technologies Inc., a \$500-million company that provides online games such as chess, Bejeweled and solitaire.

Abony told The Daily Gleaner on Friday he was recruited by McKenna.

Abony's wife is from New Brunswick.

"I am delighted to have been appointed ambassador to New Brunswick," he said.

"New Brunswick is a wonderful and special province, with dynamic and skilled people."

He said he has chosen to make his second home in New Brunswick.

"As ambassador, I look forward to spreading the word that our province is a warm and friendly place for business and family," said Abony.

Byrne said his department has no plans to stop signing up more business ambassadors now that it has reached its initial goal.

"We certainly haven't put an upper limit on the program at all," he said.

The more people who are interested in signing up and the more contacts the government can make, the more benefit there will be for New Brunswick, said Byrne.

"We would like to have major business contacts in every sector of the economy and internationally," he said.

He said his department is compiling an inventory of the ambassadors so they can target investments and business partnerships.

"We will maintain regular contact," he said.

When the province goes on a trade mission to somewhere such as New England, the ambassadors in the area will be advised and, in advance of the mission, they will have a networking session about opening doors, said Byrne.

"You can see this just has incredible potential," he said.