

## John J. Heldrich banks on leadership to maintain the momentum of New Brunswick's turnaround

*John J. Heldrich, the founder of New Brunswick Tomorrow and former Johnson & Johnson corporate vice president, has been committed to the revival of downtown New Brunswick for years. Through his efforts, the city has become home to Johnson & Johnson's world headquarters, a scattering of modern office buildings and a link to Route 18 across the Raritan River, among other accomplishments. That revival continues most recently with the proposed \$100 million Heldrich Plaza (BUSINESS NEWS, October 4).*

**BUSINESS NEWS:** When did your interest in New Brunswick begin?

**Heldrich:** I was born and raised here, worked for Johnson & Johnson. I came from a Depression family. My mother was a widow with five boys, and I was the youngest. I used to play baseball here, back by the old Johnson & Johnson plant, and dream about playing for the New York Yankees. World War II came, and I went to war. I returned and went to Rutgers University and then went into the Johnson & Johnson training program. I always used to say that the New York Yankees didn't take me so I went to Johnson & Johnson.

**BUSINESS NEWS:** Where does the revitalization now stand?

**Heldrich:** When we started the revival process in 1975, the city was in a very depressed state. The first phase of its renaissance was to restore the economic and social fabric. Now you have the second phase with new leadership, and they're building on the foundation.

**BUSINESS NEWS:** How did the renewal process gain momentum?

**Heldrich:** A few things were very unique about our process. The failure in many cities was that they over-concentrated on the economic side to the detriment of the social side. What we did was to work on both simultaneously. That is why you have New Brunswick Tomorrow [the organization he founded in 1975 and chaired until 1995], which became the springboard for the development of a social model to deal with this city. Then you had the New Brunswick Development Corporation, which is private but highly collaborative with the city. As I look ahead, the biggest concern is that we have to continue to provide leadership. Leadership provides the vehicle to keep the key parties together and everybody moving forward.

**BUSINESS NEWS:** How do you see the Heldrich Plaza contributing to this effort?

**Heldrich:** It is the second largest development since the Johnson & Johnson world headquarters was set up. You can see this whole section of New Brunswick being a dream come true. It will act both as an economic vehicle and at the same time it offers greater incentives for bringing people into the city.

**BUSINESS NEWS:** Will it attract other corporations?

**Heldrich:** We have the opportunity for a lot of smaller businesses to come. We don't have much land, but if you get out on to the outskirts of New Brunswick, there is opportunity. When we started the renewal efforts 25 to 30 years ago—when the city was at rock



**"The failure in many cities was that they over-concentrated on the economic side to the detriment of the social side."**

bottom—you had no interest from the private sector except from Johnson & Johnson. It was high risk. Why would you want to go into a city that was not in good financial and social shape? Today, for example, 80% of the financing for the Heldrich Plaza comes from private sources. That is a big change. It shows there is confidence in the city.

**BUSINESS NEWS:** What lessons can other troubled cities such as Newark, Camden and Paterson learn from New Brunswick?

**Heldrich:** New Brunswick's great strength is that it is manageable. You can get your arms around its issues and problems. Newark is a huge city—its problems and opportunities are big. They've come a long way with the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, and now they're talking about an arena. But it is so big that it takes longer to begin to see the results. The key is to provide the leadership and the direction and bring together the people who can make things happen.

**BUSINESS NEWS:** Does every city need a company like Johnson & Johnson to anchor the turnaround?

**Heldrich:** With more resources, opportunities will get better. Many companies left these cities and went to the suburbs and they've been hurt by that. Johnson & Johnson didn't do that. What we are trying to do is to draw the companies back into the cities. Workforce development is also very important. We can improve the economic and social well-being of the people in the cities if we can get jobs. That is why I established the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development in New Brunswick.

**BUSINESS NEWS:** How much is left to be done in New Brunswick?

**Heldrich:** Our objective from the very beginning was to have a renaissance of this city that makes it healthy, both economically and socially. We hoped to bring it back to its former place as one of the most outstanding cities in the state. What we can't do is lose our focus and fail to provide the necessary leadership as we permanently cross the rubicon. The first task was to reestablish a base of confidence and unity and progress. The second phase we are in is bigger with bigger projects, more opportunities. That phase may go on for another five to 10 years and, we hope, go into a third phase that will have a more regional impact. The key to it is that we have to continue to build and bring in new leadership all the time and not let ourselves get back to where we were.

**BUSINESS NEWS:** Do you see enough young people getting into urban renewal?

**Heldrich:** To me it's never enough. I'd like to see more, but we have a good nucleus.

**BUSINESS NEWS:** What is your dream for New Brunswick?

**Heldrich:** We're right now in the middle of the dream that New Brunswick become the Health City. That comes with the development of the Academic Health Center, and bringing into New Brunswick other health-related organizations, so it becomes a center for health excellence. And then you have the cultural center. Up until Newark's Performing Arts Center, we were the largest in the state. Now the vision is to be the biggest and most outstanding regional cultural center. ■