

BANKS

Sydney Credit Union building new downtown branch

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SYDNEY — There's more construction on the way to downtown Sydney, this time for a local bank.

The Sydney Credit Union is preparing to build a new branch on the corner of George and Townsend streets where the parking lot for its current downtown branch sits.

The local credit union's CEO, Caleb Gibbons, said it will open by December 2025 if things stay on schedule.

"We're almost ready to break ground," Gibbons said. "We're probably about a month delayed, which isn't excessive in these current times."

The bank decided on the new branch building with the business "busting at the seams" in need of space, said Gibbons. Age is also a factor.

"There's some issues with the building, but we have a good footprint there (downtown)," he said.

"I think it was time — it was built in the early '70s. But it certainly is going to change the skyline of downtown Sydney."

The current branch will remain open until the new building is complete, after which it will be demolished.

It will be the latest construction project to get un-



The Sydney Credit Union Branch on Townsend Street. A new branch is in the works to be built in the current bank's parking lot, with Sydney Credit Union CEO Caleb Gibbons saying crews are "almost ready" to break ground.

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derway in downtown Sydney, with the new Nova Scotia Community College campus on the Esplanade and Charlotte Street redevelopments among those being completed

this year.

More construction of different kinds is anticipated in the coming years — including a new hotel, residential and commercial complex on

the waterfront.

The Sydney Credit Union has four branches: downtown, Sydney River, Whitney Pier and North Sydney, the latter of which recently

merged with Sydney.

It's one of two credit unions with a presence in Sydney. The other, Cape Breton Credit Union, has a branch on Prince Street.

Q&A

New credit union CEO worked around the world

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SYDNEY RIVER — The new chief executive of the Sydney Credit Union is glad to be running a hometown bank after years of working around the world.

Caleb Gibbons started his career in banking in the 1980s as a teller at the Sydney RBC branch. Now, he has returned to local banking to run Sydney Credit Union.

Between those points were years of "globetrotting," as Gibbons called it. It started with jobs in Toronto and Vancouver but eventually, he scored jobs across the financial world in New York, Frankfurt, Singapore and Tokyo, with banks including RBC, TD and Scotiabank. He moved back to Cape Breton a few years ago and taught at Cape Breton University's Shannon School of Business.

Gibbons takes over the CEO role as the last chief executive, Carol Ripley, retired in June.

Sydney Credit Union has four branches, one each in Sydney, Sydney River, Whitney Pier and North Sydney (a branch it acquired via merger with North Sydney Credit Union earlier this year). The Sydney Credit Union is also approaching its 90-year milestone.

The Cape Breton Post sat down with Gibbons to discuss his career, why he came home and the future of the credit union.

This conversation has been edited for grammar, clarity and length.

Q: What was it that finally brought you back home?

A: Partially family-related things. It was just when COVID-19 was happening and my mother was getting up there in age. And there was the opportunity to teach at Cape Breton University. I know the dean, George Karaphillis, quite well, who



Caleb Gibbons is the new CEO of Sydney Credit Union, which operates four branches across Sydney and North Sydney. After working for banks around Canada and the world over a more than 25-year career, Gibbons said he's glad to be taking up a chief executive bank role in his hometown. **LUKE DYMENT • CAPE BRETON POST**

just retired last year. So it was a good opportunity to come in and impart some knowledge in terms of the globetrotting and the capital market side of things. I think for the students, it was good. I was on a rolling one-year contract with CBU. I knew I'd be fine for a year, but the next year might be a question mark. And there's not a lot of what I would call careers of this calibre (credit union CEO) that come up. So when I saw the CEO for the credit union, I thought that I had a good background for that.

Q: What are some challenges the credit union is facing?

A: It's getting very expensive for the smaller (credit union) players to make a go of it, so we're seeing a big consolidation trend. Another one we discussed a lot at this conference in Boston (the 2024 World Credit Union Conference) was the fact that the

membership is aging. So the challenge is to get younger members in because, whether it's Venmo or these payment services, a lot of younger people don't feel they need a brick-and-mortar bank.

But the credit unions are where the members own it, it's a financial cooperative. So I think a lot of the social goals of a credit union are very much in line with the younger population we're seeing, especially in CBRM.

On the investment side, I think it's the fact that people are not really getting that much of a return on their investments. I think at some point the curve will normalize, but a lot of people are parked in the fairly short end because they basically look for where they get the highest rate, rather than trying to put too much thinking into it in terms of what the Bank of Canada is going to be doing, because that's just beyond the scope of many people in terms of their planning.

Q: What excited you about this job opportunity in particular? Given you've worked with many banks and seen lots.

A: I think it's the fact that it's got a sizable membership of 14,000 and about \$350 million in assets, and the growth potential. In terms of the ranking of the largest credit unions in the country, if we are able to get up to \$500 million through natural growth or acquisitions, that would put us as the 75th largest.

Next year is the 90th anniversary for Sydney Credit Union. They started way back in 1935 in the back of a barber shop on George Street, so there's a lot of history. If you look at a lot of the credit unions, some of them started with servicing steel workers, teachers and different segments of the community.

But I think the unique thing about this which fits with my background is that they've

got a pretty good-sized commercial book. We're very strong in new construction mortgages and lines of credit. So in terms of our product offerings, that commercial book here is north of \$50 million and we've got room to grow that.

Q: The credit union is unique in the fact that you see them out in the community a lot. Was that something on your mind when you were looking into the job?

A: It was, because of the member share — the pool of money that's returned to customers at the end of the year. In addition to that, we sponsored Makin' Waves at Wentworth Park which was very successful again this year. We're very extensive in terms of activities — providing scholarships at CBU or supporting the Cape Breton Regional Hospital Foundation. The list is quite long, but we're able to help a lot of community organizations.

Q: What's your outlook on the future of the Sydney Credit Union?

A: The asset base has effectively doubled over the last decade. We're in a good spot. We have a very large Indigenous membership, about eight per cent of it, which is a real positive. We've got a lot of very strong, long-tenured employees running that book of business and I think a lot of potential to grow that especially where North Sydney just rolled in. I think there's a lot of commercial potential there.

I think in terms of this environment, I think we're sized at the right level and I think the mandate that I was hired under is a growth mandate trying to get that membership up from 14,000 hopefully to something like 25,000, and as a sort of incremental step, to get the asset base up to half a billion dollars from \$350 million.

