

NEWRY... the city with a **BIG** future

Newry city continues to attract foreign economic investment

Irish News business editor Gary McDonald visits Newry to discover that the city is continuing to carve out an international reputation as a thriving business centre

It was no coincidence that Declan Kelly chose Newry last month to deliver a significant address on cementing greater US/Irish economic and business relationships.

After all, US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton's Special Economic Envoy to Northern Ireland is already acutely aware of Newry's strong bonds with the United States.

And he was able to reflect on the positive, innovative and entrepreneurial spirit of the Newry business community and of the city's lure for potential foreign investors.

Mr Kelly described it as "an honour" to be among members of the Newry business community who have helped to establish the city's international reputation as a thriving commercial centre.

"Their resilience and vision have elevated Newry City's role as a key hub on the Belfast to Dublin economic corridor, and I'm delighted to be here to learn more about their continued efforts," he said.

You could say that "resilience and vision" have become the watchwords for Newry, which has never been shy of promoting itself as one of Ireland's premier cities in which to invest, work, live and visit.

That's something which will be underlined when the Greater Newry Business Awards take place in the city tomorrow week, honouring the best of the best.

There's no denying that it's been a difficult last year for the city, with the recession still biting, a widening gap between the euro and pound making cross-border shopping less attractive, and the negativity that went with a dissident bomb attack on the courthouse in February.

But Newry never sits on its hands, even if there's a reluctant acceptance that the current economic climate will make it difficult to replicate the city's soaraway successes of the last decade.

Retaining the bulk of its skilled young people and encouraging more students to consider industry as a career were among the central themes running through Newry and Mourne District Council's new four-year economic development strategy published in March.

The blueprint views economic development in its broadest sense, incorporating economic development, regeneration, tourism, rural development, education, workforce development and skills.

"This is still a time of considerable hope and optimism for Newry," says leading businessman Feargal McCormack, managing director of FPM Chartered Accountants.

"Newry will continue to focus on its many strengths such as location, strong retail and manufacturing sectors, international success and powerful private sector to build for the future," he added.

"The launch of the Newry & Mourne economic development strategy and action plan is highly significant and recognises that, like all modern economies, we must manage the transition to high value added activity," Mr McCormack said.

Greater Newry has enjoyed £300 million investment over the last decade, and recent tourism figures showed that there were 81,000 overnight visits to the region, pumping £14 million into the local economy.

You don't need to look hard in Newry for evidence of

the city's 'get up and go' attitude.

Despite a fall-off in southern shoppers, both the Quays and Buttercrane centres claim to be trading on or slightly ahead of target.

Companies like independent accident management business CRASH, established in 1996 by Michael McKeown, continue to enjoy rapid expansion. Indeed it says it has supported more than 25,000 Northern Ireland motorists and handled £60 million-plus of claims since its foundation.

Other firms are flourishing too, among them First Derivatives, a global service provider in the capital markets technology sector, whose managing director Brian Conlon is on the 24-strong short list for this year's Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year competition - as indeed is Eamonn O'Hare of O'Hare & McGovern Construction, also headquartered in Newry.

"Entrepreneurial activity around Newry is ensuring that we can remain competitive in these more difficult economic times," said Chamber of Commerce president Dr Conor Patterson.

"It's incredible that a small city like ours is so well represented in a competition like this," he added.

In recent days in the city Agriculture Minister Michelle Gildernew officially opened the newly refurbished DARD Direct office at Glenree House in the city.

It is the fourth of what will be a network of 12 DARD Direct offices across the north, offering farmers the opportunity to access the department's farm business services in one place and provides a choice of how business is conducted.

Next week Newry will also become the location for the office of the Honorary Consulate of Latvia.

Earlier this year Newry entrepreneur Dr Gerard O'Hare was appointed Honorary Consul of the Republic of Latvia for Northern Ireland.

In the first instance he will be concerned with the well-being of all Latvian citizens who come to visit, work, study or reside in Northern Ireland, but he will also be tasked with helping the promotion of trade and business links as well as supporting cultural, tourism and educational exchange with Latvia.

And looking further forward, Newry - as part of its efforts to become Ireland's leading eco-city - plays host to Ken Melamed, mayor of Whistler in Canada, and the man who steered the resort municipality through the greenest Winter Olympics in history.

On June 28 delegates from around Ireland will meet in Newry to engage with leaders from Whistler as well as Helsingborg in Sweden and Morbegno in Italy, when they will discuss how they can win investment, reduce costs and improve the lives of local people and visitors by being sustainable.

Newry mayor John Feehan says: "The conference is taking place at an opportune time as Newry and Mourne, along with our colleagues in Louth County Council are making significant strides in our shared objective to promote the Newry Dundalk Twin City region as an exemplar for sustainable development. "For several years both Councils have co-operated on a cross border basis on a range of initiatives culminating in the declaration earlier this year of the Newry City Low Carbon zone. We are keen to share our experiences and to learn from other regions such as Whistler, in Canada."

Newry is already on the path to sustainability with a pioneering Low Energy Zone with up to 30 local partners taking actions to reduce the use and impact of energy on the city.



Above: Declan Kelly, US special economic envoy to Northern Ireland pictured with Dr Conor Patterson, president of Newry Chamber.



Left: Agriculture Minister Michelle Gildernew officially opens the newly refurbished DARD Direct Office at Glenree House, Newry. PICTURE: Liam McArdle.com.