

Ready for Big Ten's booming business

New Brunswick already seeing financial impact

By [Joshua Burd](#)

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Devco head Chris Paladino: “The Big Ten affiliation for Rutgers is far more than athletics.” -
(PHOTO BY AARON HOUSTON)

Brian Karluk knew Rutgers University's move to the Big Ten conference would bring an economic boost to New Brunswick. But he didn't understand just how much until a few months ago, when his restaurant started getting calls from Penn State fans.

“We're already busy on Saturday nights,” said Karluk, co-owner of Steakhouse 85, the city's largest restaurant. “But what's interesting for us is seeing the influx ... of people calling to make reservations for Friday nights and Sunday nights months in advance.

“And by the area codes on the numbers, these were obviously people from out of town.”

Karluk and other business owners are gearing up as Rutgers will host the Nittany Lions this weekend, the first of several Big Ten games this season that will bring flocks of hardcore, well-traveling and well-heeled fans that New Brunswick has never seen before.

And it's not just this year, but every year going forward for what could be a recurring windfall. So for business leaders, it's important to get it right the first time.

“This isn't like the Super Bowl and this isn't like an Olympics or World Cup, where you get one shot in a generation,” said Christopher Paladino, president of New Brunswick Development Corp. “This is about building relationships and putting your best foot forward, and the Big Ten affiliation for Rutgers is far more than athletics.”

The Sept. 13 game comes after nearly two years of anticipation, ever since Rutgers announced it would leave the Big East after 20 years in favor of a conference that stands to catapult it academically, athletically and financially.

If ticket sales are any indication — it was the earliest a Rutgers game has sold out prior to a season since High Point Solutions Stadium was expanded in 2009 — businesses won't be disappointed with the turnout. And Paladino notes they won't be just any visitors, but a group that includes prominent Northeast-area alumni and businesspeople.

Case in point: Penn State President Eric Barron is hosting a fundraiser Friday — not in Manhattan, but in the Hub City. Good for business, yes, but the more important benefit will be connecting with “those alumni and university contributors that will be in town, who may be exposed to New Brunswick for the first time.”

“They may be people in the area who aren't that familiar with New Brunswick, who actually become regular customers of our restaurants,” said Paladino, a Rutgers alumnus. “Maybe they're CEOs of a company that are interested in putting a business here.”

Already, he said the Devco-owned Heldrich hotel in the city has blocks of rooms reserved by Michigan alumni and fans from Manhattan, Boston and Washington, ahead of the Oct. 4 game in Piscataway. For Penn State, the 248-room facility was completely booked Saturday, and at press time “on the verge” of being sold out Friday.

The hotel also will be the headquarters for the Big Ten Network for Rutgers games, which requires 80 rooms alone, not to mention the site of a welcome reception for the broadcast crew. Paladino said this is “a generational investment for us.”

Within just a few years, Paladino hopes that spotlight will shine on a bona fide college town. Devco is in the midst of a sweeping, \$330 million expansion of Rutgers' College Avenue campus — creating new housing and academic buildings, along with a vast outdoor plaza and a 600-square-foot screen that he hopes can become the hub for Big Ten Network broadcasts.

The region got a small glimpse of how out-of-town fans can descend on the area for a big game when the Arkansas Razorbacks visited Rutgers last fall. Paladino said much of that business went to New York City, but he thinks that will change given the long-term nature of the Big Ten commitment.

“We think that business will come home, because people are looking for a college football experience,” Paladino said. “And New Brunswick has the ability to put itself on par with Ann Arbor, Madison and Columbus with respect to creating a college town experience.”

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Salt Lake City success story

As a starting point, New Brunswick can only hope to follow in the footsteps of Salt Lake City. Since fall 2011, the city has been reaped the benefits of the University of Utah’s move to the Pac-12 conference from the Mountain West.

And those gains have been well-documented. Average out-of-state attendance at Utah’s home football games has doubled since it joined the Pac-12, according to a study by the university’s Center for Public Policy & Administration. The same researchers also found that in the inaugural Pac-12 season, 2011-2012, taxes from visitor spending and television revenues increased 60 percent.

Dianne Meppen, a research associate at the University of Utah, also points to media attention that came with the games, “which (is) an intangible thing to measure,” but can’t be understated.

“You have a camera, you have the game going on and you see this beautiful city, and you see the university,” Meppen said. “And all of that doesn’t even come into the economic impact. It’s difficult to quantify, yet so much exposure for (the city) and for Utah.”