



Three Rivers Region Public Consultation Process

Summary Report

October 2016



Message from the Chair

Three Rivers Region Steering Committee

Dear Residents of the Three Rivers region,

On behalf of the Three Rivers Region Steering Committee, I am pleased to issue this summary report on the findings from the public consultation sessions held as part of the ongoing work to explore a regionalization process for our communities and residents.

The Steering Committee, comprised of councillors and Chief Administrative Officers from across the Three Rivers region, has been working hard over the last two years to hold productive discussions and to collectively advance a process that holds potential for growth and increased sustainability for our region. This is a new process for PEI, and this Committee of volunteers has dedicated many hours to ensure all concerns, questions and opportunities are examined. The process is ongoing, and the Steering Committee strongly believes that public consultations are a critical component of identifying the questions, concerns and ideas that will define our next steps.

Through the recent consultations we have heard that residents from unincorporated areas – who currently have no official municipal representation – want to be kept informed about the process and need a representative on the Steering Committee. We will be acting on this recommendation and have begun work to address this important issue. As well, we will be responding in the near future to the questions raised by residents. Three sub-committees have been struck and their work over the next several weeks will be dedicated to answering residents' specific questions related to incorporated areas, ward boundaries and representation, as well as taxes, services and infrastructure under the new regional model. Responses will be shared with residents at the earliest possibility this fall.

I am grateful for the work of the dedicated volunteers on the Steering Committee, but especially grateful to each of our residents who have contributed their input to this ongoing process – through our Facebook page, website, via direct calls and e-mails, discussions with their councillors and municipal staff, as well as through their attendance and participation in the public consultation sessions. Your input is valued and critical to ensure we move in the right direction. We encourage all residents to share input and seek further information through these avenues as the process carries on.

We must continue to work together and focus on our collective priorities – ensuring quality services and infrastructure, retaining and recruiting young families to live in the Three Rivers region, protecting our lands and environment through sage planning, and establishing the opportunity for increased economic development and jobs for our residents. The Province of PEI recognizes the importance of this initiative and has made a solid commitment to support the region – including an assurance that the region will not receive any less money than it currently collectively does – as it undertakes this process.

We thank you for your participation, encourage you to become engaged in the process, and look forward to working together in the coming months.

Yours truly,

Lewis Lavandier, Chair
Three Rivers Region Steering Committee

Contents

| | | |
|-----|---|---|
| 1.0 | Introduction and Process Overview | 1 |
| 2.0 | Summary of Key Themes..... | 3 |

1.0 Introduction and Process Overview



The Three Rivers Region Steering Committee conducted two public consultation meetings – one in Montague on October 19th at the Montague Regional High School and one in Cardigan on October 20th at the Consolidated School – from 7-9 pm. The purpose of the meetings was to provide residents with information on the ongoing regionalization process as well as to solicit residents’ input on the process. Information notifying residents about the sessions was promoted through the www.3RiversPEI.com website, through an advertisement in The Eastern Graphic, and through a newsletter mailed out to residents in the Three Rivers region.¹ The meetings were generally well attended, with approximately 106 attending the Montague session and 55 attending the Cardigan session.

The same agenda was followed for each of the consultation sessions. Residents were first welcomed to the session and introduced to the Steering Committee members, consultants and facilitator, and were then shown a PowerPoint presentation that outlined background information on the regionalization process, goals for the public consultations, rationales for change on PEI, tax scenarios, as well as some concerns and opportunities that have been heard so far in the process. The presentation took approximately 35 minutes and was well received by those in attendance, with many residents commenting that their questions and concerns were addressed through the information provided. For the final hour-to-hour-and-fifteen minutes of the session, residents were invited to share their input (concerns, questions, opinions, ideas) at an open microphone and/or through written comments on a handout sheet provided.

At both meetings, residents were advised that this was an information gathering process; an opportunity to provide input to the Steering Committee. Further, it was noted to all in attendance that the Steering Committee do not have answers to all questions at this point, but questions, concerns and advice would be noted for further study.

During both of the consultations sessions, residents made good use of the time and stepped up to the microphone to provide input to the process. All resident feedback was captured live-time under key topic areas in the PowerPoint slides. Feedback that was received via written comments was compiled into the slides following the sessions.

Resident feedback captured during the two sessions has been compiled, organized and summarized in this report under six topic areas: Current Situation and Process Moving Forward; Services and Infrastructure; Tax Rates and Financial Matters; Community Identity and Governance; and, Looking to the Future. Key, recurring themes and questions that emerged from the two sessions are presented in Section 2.0 of this report.

A complete record of residents’ comments and questions during the sessions was also compiled, and the three principal areas where residents are seeking further information pertain to: (1) unincorporated areas;

¹ Some residents from unincorporated areas (e.g., Riverton, Martinvale) who attended the Cardigan public consultation process indicated that they did not receive the second newsletter by post.

(2) ward boundaries and representation; and (3) taxes, services and infrastructure in the new regional model. In response to residents' requests for more information, the Steering Committee has formed three sub-committees which are working in a dedicated manner over the next few weeks to respond to specific questions raised in as much detail as currently possible. Where applicable, questions the Steering Committee is unable to answer have been referred to the Province for a response.

In due course, the Steering Committee will undertake to incorporate resident input and detailed responses into the eventual information package to be provided to Municipal Councils and residents. The Three Rivers Steering Committee was very pleased with the attendance at both meetings and the quality of the input given by residents to help inform and guide this important process moving forward.

2.0 Summary of Key Themes



Overall Opportunities and Concerns of Regionalization

There were recurring positive comments that the regionalization process is an investment in the future of the communities in our region.

Many residents acknowledged that small communities are currently struggling to provide services and respond to the needs of residents in their areas. Working together gives the opportunity to strengthen our collective assets and make a better case to potential new residents.

In our region of PEI there is not enough room to take a 'we' versus 'them' stance. There is an opportunity for better understanding, cooperation and solidarity to our mutual benefit.

Attracting and retaining young families to the communities in our region is a key preoccupation for those in 'urban' and rural areas of our region.

Several residents voiced strong concern over the impact of regionalization to rural residents and unincorporated areas. Top concerns included: tax increases; no added/improved services; and that the process would only serve to strengthen the existing incorporated municipalities 'on the backs' of the rural residents.

Current Situation and Process Moving Forward

Attendees generally expressed support for the process moving forward during each of the consultation sessions, although some residents (specifically, a few residents from unincorporated areas in attendance during the Cardigan consultation session) voiced concerns about communication to date as well as the anticipated direction of regionalization.

Many residents acknowledged that change is coming, and that residents "can help direct it or it can happen to us". Residents felt – and some residents expressed concerned – that if the opportunity is not taken now to proactively attempt a regionalization process, it may come top-down from government and that forced regionalization may not provide the same negotiation opportunities.

During both sessions, attendees felt it is important for the process to focus on the critical aspects of community existence – residents (especially young families, youth and seniors), services (especially fire services) and key infrastructure that defines communities (e.g., rinks, ball fields).

The top concern voiced about the process thus far – shared by residents of incorporated and unincorporated areas alike – was that residents of unincorporated areas are unrepresented; they do not currently have a representative on the Steering Committee and do not yet have a voice in the ongoing process. There is a desire for representation from unincorporated areas moving forward in the regionalization talks and for a mechanism to be put in place to ensure residents from these areas continue to be informed in the future. There was consensus that it would be impossible to have all small

communities in unincorporated areas represented, but residents do want the Steering Committee to find a way to add new members to this working group.

There is a strong desire for more detailed information and responses to questions that have been asked by residents and councils during the process to date, including: tax rates by community and unincorporated areas; population numbers by community (including unincorporated areas); potential ward boundaries and representation by population for these areas; demographic projections for the areas; timeframes for the process moving forward; whether and when/where meetings will be held to provide information and receive input from residents in unincorporated areas.

Questions were raised about the proposed staffing model for the region moving forward, and whether the Steering Committee is making these decisions when they have a vested interest in keeping a position for themselves under the new structure.

Questions were also raised about the minimum threshold for the process to move forward: What if only three or four of the municipalities want to regionalize in the end? Can the process continue if fewer than the seven agree to the terms? Can the process move forward without some of the unincorporated areas?

Many residents acknowledged the significant work that has been undertaken by the Steering Committee to date and thanked them for their hard work.

Services and Infrastructure

Residents acknowledged that infrastructure projects are competitive and that working together could give a better chance to secure funds for improvements and new projects. Residents expressed concern about losing key infrastructure in their respective communities and asked what safeguards are currently in place to ensure infrastructure (e.g., rinks, ball fields, wharfs) are maintained and improved upon.

A question was raised about how the formal and – more importantly – the informal agreements related to services and infrastructure in many communities (e.g., lease agreement between local parish and recreational groups for land related to sport infrastructure) may be impacted by the regionalization process and in a new incorporated municipality.

There was a recurring comment that the quality and diversity of programming at schools in the region will depend on a solid population base of students in attendance, and thus of young families staying in and moving to the region.

Several residents identified the ongoing and increasing challenge of recruiting fire fighters in the rural districts, and the potential negative impact this could have for fire services.

Several residents acknowledged the importance of economic development and job creation in the area in order to recruit and retain residents (in particular, new young families). A few residents felt that economic development could threaten the simple and quiet life in the rural, unincorporated areas.

There was a recurring concern that regionalization may enhance the towns and currently incorporated municipalities and not offer new/additional benefits to residents of unincorporated areas.

Under a new municipal model, residents from unincorporated areas would want to have a voice on committees and boards of shared infrastructure.

Tax Rates and Financial Matters

A key, recurring question during both sessions was the impact of the proposed process on tax rates for residents throughout the region. There is concern about increased tax rates. Residents who may experience an increase in taxes – especially those in unincorporated areas – want a specific list of new and additional services they would be receiving in return for any tax increase.

Several residents asked about Provincial dollars in the process moving forward: Would the Province download services to the new municipality? Would there be compensation by the Province to support the transition? How will the Province’s current support for policing change in a new municipality?

There were multiple questions specifically related to equalization payments: How will equalization payments be impacted by the proposed process? How can we get the best possible equalization arrangement? How do we get a beneficial commitment from the Province moving forward? Is there a benefit to the Towns, unincorporated areas, and to the region as a whole?

In transitioning to a new regional model, residents want to know whether existing community debt would continue to be held by a specific municipality or whether it would be incurred by the new municipality. Further financial questions related to the new regional municipality included: What are the costs for staffing under the proposed new regionalized model and are there cost efficiencies for these changes to governance/council, administration and staffing? What will be the cost impacts as related to key services of fire and policing? There is interest in seeing a comparative costing model of the current situation versus proposed model.

Community Identity and Governance

The top concern voiced during both sessions was that residents from unincorporated areas need to be part of the Steering Committee and of the decision making process moving forward. Many residents from unincorporated areas expressed frustration in the lack of representation they currently have. It will be important to hold meetings so that residents from unincorporated areas have the opportunity to receive information and provide input to the process.

Residents from the smallest municipalities and from unincorporated areas are concerned about having adequate representation and a strong voice in the process moving forward and under the proposed regional model.

Residents from incorporated municipalities generally acknowledged that it is too challenging for small communities to continue providing an adequate level of services to their residents, and that this will only increase under the rules of the PEI Municipal Act.

Several questions were raised about how representation by population in a ward system would work in practice: Where would ward boundary lines be drawn? Is using the fire districts the best approach for the regional boundary? What happens as population numbers change in the wards over time? Will representation on a council evolve as populations grow and change? Would there be equitable representation from all areas? Would a single vote give adequate voice to the residents in a given ward?

Several suggestions were made regarding the new proposed regional council: that 12 is too many councillors and nine may be a more manageable number of councillors; that the mayor should come from among the elected ward representatives and not be selected through a separate process; that representatives should be selected based on merit; that unincorporated areas must have representation.

Many residents expressed appreciation for the opportunity to hear the concerns of their neighbours through the public consultation process and hoped the discussions would continue.

Looking to the Future

Thinking about the future of the Three Rivers region, two aspects were evident priorities for those who attended the consultation sessions: attracting and retaining young families to their communities, and providing quality services and infrastructure that respond to residents' needs and interests.

It is not possible to continue the way things have been going in the municipalities, and it is not wise to simply wait and see what might happen. The risk is that many communities will cease to exist if we ignore the change that is upon us and our region. Residents should continue to be proactive, engaged, and advance the regionalization process.

Job creation will be important for attracting new residents (especially young persons) to the area.

We need to think about the needs of our seniors and of the aging population as we move forward with the process.