

## **Regional Government Consultation Burin Peninsula**

Sept. 24<sup>th</sup>, 2011 Marystown, 8:30- 12:00 P.M.

The meeting started with Robert Keenan, Community Cooperation Officer (CCO) with MNL, addressing the municipal officials. Mr. Keenan opened with a presentation on Regional Government and regionalization. In the first part of the presentation, he addressed the reasons for why MNL is examining regional government, and why they are examining it now. It was pointed out that these consultations are a follow-up to the three regional government discussion papers released by MNL in 2010 -- *Continuities and Discontinuities*, *Searching for a Purpose*, and *The Umbrella of Protection*.

The CCO officer advanced MNL's position that the current municipal structure needed to be reformed. The purpose of this much-needed reform would be to increase the efficiency, feasibility, and sustainability of municipalities, while protecting municipal autonomy. The CCO officer emphasized the need for reform at this time because municipalities need:

- to become better organized;
- to find ways to maintain and improve aging infrastructure;
- to address the demographic difficulties that exist for many small towns; and
- to account for the reduced financial and technical support available to municipalities from the provincial government.

Mr. Keenan pointed out that neither the Provincial nor Federal Government has a plan for local government in Newfoundland and Labrador. Such a plan, however, is warranted, and municipalities ought to take the lead in putting forward ideas and suggestions to make them (municipalities) better and more sustainable. Mr. Keenan noted that municipal leaders are local leaders dealing with local problems. Further, it is local leaders, not Provincial government officials, who are better positioned to address the problems with the Province's local government system.

Finally, the CCO Program Officer explained the purpose of the consultations and the workbook. Participants were informed that workbooks had been sent to all municipalities in the Province; they were encouraged to complete the workbooks as a council and as individual councils. After this brief presentation, the consultation moved to a question-and-answer session; a summary follows.

**Question 1: What do you think is your region? Why do you think this is your region? And what do you estimate to be the population of your region?**

This question drew many responses:

- The Discovery Trail was cited as a region.
- Others described the Burin Peninsula as their region -- the only question was whether this region started at Goobies or Terrenceville.
- Many chose the Burin Peninsula as their region because they felt home began when they turned off the highway at Goobies.
- Some suggested their region encompassed Clarenville to Goobies.

- The Cabot Loop was described as comprising one of the larger regions.
- Two distinct regions were suggested: Terrenceville South as its own region separate from Goobies and Clarenville -- due to large geographic areas.

This question ended with a lively discussion around what determines a region. The issue of demographics versus geography was raised. It was suggested that due to advances in technology, in particular, the internet with Facebook, Skype and other programs, regions were becoming bigger and bigger. It was decided, however, that for current purposes, geographical regions would be sufficient indicators for regions.

**Question 2: How would you rate the level of cooperation that currently exists in your region?**

Here is a sample of some of the responses:

- One individual rated cooperation as very poor in their region -- going so far as to say that cooperation was nonexistent.
- Some respondents suggested that more help would be needed between the larger and smaller municipalities to ensure that cooperation was not merely a give-and-take relationship, but effective and sustainable.
- One respondent admitted that their town was going through amalgamation discussions with four other towns because they all lacked essential services to stay apart, and was not necessarily a positive experience.
- There was a general concern that smaller communities needed a stronger voice to effectively cooperate and collaborate equally with the larger communities.
- Individuals from Grand Bank and Fortune explained that cooperation was excellent between the two with service-sharing arrangements concerning: ambulances, waste management and emergency services.
- Hurricane Igor was cited as an example as to how well the municipalities could cooperate.

Although there were some positive experiences, many individuals were concerned about the discrepancies between larger and smaller communities. It was suggested that unless a stronger voice is given to smaller communities, the region will continue to be run by a few communities. One individual suggested re-establishing a regional/joint council in order to make sure that no towns were being left out.

The session then turned in a question-and-answer period between the CCO Officer and break out groups.

**Question 3: What services presently performed by municipalities should be conducted regionally or should never be conducted regionally?**

After a period of thought, here are some of the group responses:

- Many cited firefighting as a service which could be conducted regionally; however, provisions would have to be put in place so that the locations of fire stations ensured the Towns' security.

- Some felt firefighting should always be local, never regional.
- Many respondents agreed that recreational services could be regional.
- Economic development and waste management were services that most felt could be regional.
- Water, roads and infrastructure were all local issues that would not work in a regional context.

Individuals raised tentative support for regionalized programs; however, one individual warned of resentment that could occur should services be regionalized. If certain towns get to have the headquarters or to administer the services under regional government, this could create resentment from other municipalities and undermine the system. Another individual agreed to the idea of regionalized services and felt that no services or regional practices should be imposed on towns against their will.

**Question 4: Are you aware of the regional council option set out in Part II of the *Municipalities Act*? If so, have you ever considered establishing a regional council in your area?**

This question was considered:

Few respondents admitted that they were aware of this part of the Act. Two sets of separate municipalities had preliminary discussions; however, nothing came to fruition.

**Question 5: Should regional government be municipally controlled or a partnership between municipalities and the provincial government and/or other regional bodies?**

This answer generated a majority consensus:

- Some chose to have a municipal partnership.
- One group supported a municipally controlled approach.
- Most officials opted for a mix of both systems: a municipally controlled system that had a partnership with the government and other agencies.

**Question 6: Do you think that regional government should be optional or mandatory?**

Here is a sample of the responses:

- All groups stated that it should be optional as no municipality wants to have regional government imposed upon them against their will
- One individual suggested that although it should be optional, the system would have to be mandatory for taxation to be successful. This would apply to all citizens.

**Question 7: How do you propose giving voice to the interests and concerns of LSDs and unincorporated areas within a regional government?**

Considerable discussion ensued:

- All attendees supported the inclusion of LSDs and unincorporated areas into regional government.
- One suggestion advocated for a committee with equal representation for all participants in regional government.
- Another respondent said that the regional government should have regular electoral seats that last for two to three years where everyone -- LSDs, municipalities etc. -- have an equal chance of being elected; and everyone is represented -- this way all parties have their turn in the government.
- Another respondent proposed one representative per ward in a ward system within regional government.
- Others supported direct governance by the regional government. The LSDs and unincorporated areas would be represented on the regional government.

One respondent gave an example of a woman, who was paying more to keep up her road and street light, than it would cost a incorporated municipality. This respondent informed the woman her situation would be much cheaper in a municipality. This respondent explained that instead of “*requiring*” LSDs and unincorporated areas to join regional government, “*persuade*” would be a better term. This respondent stated that towns should be persuaded to incorporate – stressing it would be in their best interests. Further, this individual suggested that perhaps MNL should lead discussions and sessions around the Province in order to convince Towns to incorporate.

**Question 8: Should a regional government have: A. Specific legislatively prescribed responsibilities; or B. Only those responsibilities delegated to it by the municipalities and communities in the region?**

Points discussed included:

- A consensus was reached that in order to have any kind of order or accountability, the legislatively prescribed responsibilities would be the best choice.
- Sometimes further responsibilities may be allowed if the need arises.
- There needs to be a constitution and a regional government with laws and regulations for citizens to follow.
- This legislation can lead to the funding of LSDs and municipalities.

**Question 9: Should a regional government be: A. Flexible: able to perform any municipal service that a municipality or group of municipalities wants the regional government to perform; or B. Inflexible: perform only those responsibilities granted to it upon its creation?**

Many participants elaborated on their previous decision for question 8 in question 9, stating that although regional government should be legislatively controlled, respondents were against rigidly prescribed systems. All respondents favoured flexibility -- one respondent called for a combination of inflexible and flexible governance. Each official believed that although governments would need to be responsible and legislate responsibilities, they still must allow for flexibility in a regional government. No one

wanted to be part of restrictive rules that could not be flexible on each municipalities' needs.

**Question 10: How should the costs of regional services be set: A. All residents within a region pay the same fee; or B. Fees would vary depending on which services you receive from the region?**

Unanimity on this Question:

- Every group agreed that all residents within a region pay the same fee; this was viewed as the most equitable option presented.

**Question 11: How do you think a regional government should raise revenue: A. Invoice municipalities for the costs of regional services; B. Regional government should impose and collect its own tax; C. Regional government should work with municipalities to set appropriate tax rates to cover the cost of regional services; D. Each household pay a fee for service to the regional government for each service it receives from the regional government?**

No consensus was reached for this question. Most respondents could not decisively agree on any option.

- One group chose option **B**, and stated that income tax would be the easiest way to collect the needed revenue.
- Another group disagreed, choosing instead some form of regional tax over income tax and property tax.

**Question 12: If a regional government were to use some form of taxation, what type should it use: A. Property tax: regional government rate added to the municipal rate; B. Income tax: a regional government would receive a portion of the income tax from the provincial government; C. Sales tax: a regional government would receive a portion of the sales tax from the provincial government; D. Fee for service; E. Combination of the above options?**

Points discussed:

- All agreed that **B** Income Tax would be the best method of those presented.
- One group stated that maybe Income Tax would be difficult for municipalities to monitor and administer, therefore, property tax and business tax may be a better option
- The business tax was one option with support that was not listed.

**Question 13: If regional government results in the establishment of a two- tier system, how should regional councils be selected: A. Directly elected; B. Appointed by municipal and community councils; or C. Other?**

Discussion points:

- Most respondents favoured **A** -- Directly elected -- as this was seen to be the most democratic.

- There was some support for **B** by municipal and community councils. The reasoning was that the representatives would be elected officials in elected office.

**Question 14: If regional government results in the establishment of a two- tier system, how do you think a regional government should make decisions: A. One vote per representative with majority rules; B. Weighted voting with majority rules - the number of votes a representative can cast is determined by the population of the representative's municipality; C. Double majority - support is needed by a majority of municipalities/communities representing a majority of the population in the region; D. Double majority based on incorporation - support is needed by a majority of municipalities and a majority of LSDs in a region?**

Discussion points:

- One group selected option **A**. This was viewed as the option that would be fair to all parties in regional government -- the argument was that all the other options favoured the larger communities.
- The remaining respondents favoured option **B**.

The consultation ended with the CCO officer thanking all participants and urging them to complete the workbook.

General findings from this consultation include:

- There is widespread support for regional government.
- On the Burin Peninsula, there is a stronger regional bond, given the geographic makeup of the region.
- In many areas on the Burin, regional cooperation is very poor.
- A forum, committee and voice for the smaller municipalities is needed, so that the larger towns do not dominate.