

# Rural Development Discussion Strategy

July 8, 2009

Presented by

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It's difficult on one hand to speak on these issues and yet it is easy to speak on these issues. It's difficult because there is the possibility that no one will actually listen and for some one or some group to whom the matter of rural development on their own home ground is of critical importance. It is easy because I've spoken on this topic so many times before.

I've always found anecdotes a really good way to demonstrate something. I have an anecdote about the difficulty in communication about what we need in Eastern Kings – which for the record – is how I think about the Souris area. While I am the mayor of Souris, I am very aware that the entire Eastern Kings area, also referred to as the Souris Family of Schools, which ranges from Dingwell's Mills to East Point, bordered by Annandale to the south and Monticello to the north is what makes Souris, Souris.

Efforts are being made to hear the voice of Eastern Kings and not too long ago, a contingent from the city (also known as Charlottetown) came to the country to hear what we wanted and needed.

Ah. Music to our ears. They want to listen to us. Phrases like "the upward flow of information" and "from the ground up" and "reverse pyramid" were bandied about. Finally, we thought, the city is getting it. We need to have our own distinctive voice heard in the halls of government. We need them to understand that there is a very strong culture in Eastern Kings.

There are sociological and historical reasons for this but tonight I will not go into details on those reasons. For this presentation, it is sufficient to understand that in Eastern Kings we have our traditions, our mindset, our strengths, and our world view.

So there we are – at the table – wonderful Kings County view outside and representatives from many communities. But not all communities – there were some obvious gaps in the representatives who were invited to that meeting. But I digress. So there we are, hearing about a great new project and how we will be involved from the very onset in designing this project based on the input from Kings County.

Within a matter of minutes, there is a problem. The old flipchart is out and the county is delineated on it in categories that the presenters felt best described the county. What do we think of this? We were asked.

We responded – well, you are missing this, this, and this. Our voices were expressed. Ah yes. The committee was there to hear what we, the people of Kings County, wanted.

Well, the presenter said, that is not one of the categories gleaned from the studies on Kings County that we absorbed.

Yes, we noted. But those studies were done from afar (Charlottetown) and they did not grasp the power of volunteerism (to use an example) in this county.

An argument ensued. In a nutshell, it went like this:

PRESENTER: But these are the categories we are dealing with.

US: But those are not the categories that we use.

PRESENTER: But these are the categories we are using for this purpose.

US: You are not listening to us.

Our collective hearts sank.

Mouthing the words does not work in Eastern Kings. Do not come to us with an exciting plan designed in the city and ask for our input and then argue with us that our input is wrong.

And that is at the heart of our concerns here in Eastern Kings – that this rural development plan will look great on paper but fail to address the needs, desires, and reality of this particular chunk of rural PEI.

When we say that our society has traditionally relied on volunteerism, you have to understand that it really does rely on volunteerism. Failing to grasp that essential part of what makes Eastern Kings tick will result in failure of any program you send our way.

We are also a reticent group, sometimes shy to say what we want when we are asked. Some of this is because there is a perception that the government isn't going to listen anyway. Some of it is because we feel that we don't have the education, skills, and vocabulary of the city.

If the rural strategy does not take into serious consideration the cultures that they are dealing with, any plans they come up with are doomed to failure.

For instance, while in the city, Kings County is viewed as one holistic group, there are really two sides to the county. East and South. In looking at a strategy for rural Kings county, treating the entire county as one conglomerate of citizens will create divisiveness that could destroy us. It would be better to focus on the separate sections as similar but different. The needs of the Souris area are not the same as the needs of Murray Harbour. Do not make us wear the one size fits all tailor-made suit designed in Charlottetown.

One really great thing we have going for us in Eastern Kings is our culture, our passion, and our love for our way of life. Help us turn that into something enduring. Help us make the transitions we need without destroying what makes us, us.