

New report revamps local government talks in RSC8

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KINGS COUNTY RECORD

SUSSEX • A new report has Kings County buzzing again with talks about local government on a local service district level.

The report, The Development of Regions, by the Regions, supports the action from the province to get local governance talks started at a Regional Service Commission level. But the report goes further to explain these talks need to go across levels and not just be done at Regional Service Commission meetings.

This backs up the request made by the Minister of Environment and Local Government Brian Kenny when he asks commissions to take a larger role in local government talks with the release of the provincial budget at the beginning of February.

Before the report was released, the Development of Regions Summit was held in Miramichi, hosted by the New Brunswick Association of Francophone Municipalities and the Union of Municipalities New Brunswick.

Regional Service Commission 8, didn't attend the Miramichi summit, but prior to that he attended a meeting in Sussex last fall which was a part of a cross province tour leading up to the summit.

He believes there are some mixed messages between the province and local service districts, which creates a level of mistrust between the two.

"There's still some mixed views on how we should proceed in terms of local government," he said in an interview with the Kings County Record. "The LSD communities, rightfully so, are concerned about the future."

The report gives 15 recommendations for review, and the francophone association will be making a presentation and recommendation to the province sometime in April.

Frédéric Dion is the executive director of the New Brunswick Association of Francophone Municipalities. He said the report is by no means a plan and said not everything is going to work for every area.

"But, if someone says 'I don't want to hear anything about becoming a municipality,' they're closing the door to many tools available to develop your community," he said.

"The only thing we're saying is we need to have a serious talk about local governments and how we should organize ourselves."

Roberts thinks the conversation on local government hasn't changed much over the years, starting with the Finn report released in 2008. That report called on the province to lessen the number of municipalities while having local service districts represented by



A new report is asking for more involvement from Regional Service Commissions when it comes to local government talks. Shown are Regional Service Commission 8 board members at a recent meeting. From the left is Hampton mayor Ken Chorley, commission chair Tony Pollock, Sussex mayor Marc Thorne, board member Tammie Spraggett and board member Karin Boyle. PHOTO: KINGS COUNTY RECORD ARCHIVE

municipalities.

He said it's obvious the message is that every level of government needs to work together, but there hasn't been a plan set out to help accomplish that.

Roberts said a provincial report isn't the right way to proceed if the province wants to get local service districts to jump on board.

"I would rather that as a group, in our region, all the LSD reps and all the municipalities get the opportunity to shape the region themselves rather than a provincial report shaping the region," he said. "I think it should up to us and not up to provincial association."

Roberts thinks the ideal situation would not be amalgamation or annexation, but regional co-operation. He said this would allow the rural communities sustainable with the support of neighbours.

"We see the current model is going to be challenged and what I see is the LSDs feel like they're being asked to make changes for the benefit of others," he said. "I would rather we make changes for the benefit of everybody, including the LSDs."

A bottoms-up technique that focuses on communication would be ideal, he said, so local service districts feel like they're being helped and not hindered.

The Development of Regions, by the Regions report does recommend this, as well, but Roberts warns it sounds similar to the Finn Report and could turn into political decisions as opposed to what's

best for the local service districts.

Tony Pollock, chair of the Regional Service Commission 8, shares the same concerns. He noted the Finn criteria for local government restructuring used to be a population of at least 4,000 and a tax base of \$200 million. According to a letter received by the commission from Kenny, the criteria is now either a population of at least 4,000 or a tax base of \$200 million, not both.

Pollock also attended the meeting in Sussex with Roberts and left feeling like for this to work, communication from the province needs to be strengthened. Once that happens, he said it would be easier for the regional service commissions to take part in these talks about amalgamation and annexation.

"I believe (regional service commission) could play a role," he said. "But I don't believe they should be the lead."

Each regional service commission has a choice on what services they want to provide, so any inclusion in these talks would be voluntary.

Pollock would like to see the province take the reigns on these talks and invite the service commissions to participate in them.

LeRoy Armstrong is the chair of the LSD Association of Rural New Brunswick. He said he's very concerned with the report and the roles local service districts play when it comes to local government discussions.

"It's been quite a challenge to have any input on what's taking place across

the province in terms of local governance, the commission itself and also amalgamation of municipalities," he said. "We never seem to have a voice when this is taking place."

He said this report will have a significant impact on rural New Brunswick and is worried that it won't be a good one.

He attended not only the local meeting, but also the summit in Miramichi on this topic. He said the summits were looking for ideas and, in his experience, ideas from local service districts don't get acted on when it comes to the decision makers.

"I felt very much it was an exercise that didn't have much of an impact," he said. "We know what the municipalities are trying to accomplish, they're trying to get the minister to look at the Finn Report and follow along those lines."

Dion said although he understands these concerns, he feels like they're unfounded based on how hard the association tried to get input from across the province.

"What we heard in our provincial tour last fall, a main topic was that people felt they had no power," Dion said. "They said they had no influence and they didn't have the right tools to develop their community."

That power was a desire in a lot of communities, he said, and the goal was to change the model to ensure everyone has a voice.

There was no unanimous decision

when it came to that, he said, which makes it difficult to find the right solution.

One of the solutions could be amalgamation, he said, but there are also other elements to consider as well, such as regional co-operation.

Armstrong did say The Development of Regions, by the Regions report did touch on some things the local service district association is also working towards, but couldn't elaborate on what those things were.

"We do identify with some of the statements being made," he said.

He's wary on how far the collaboration between municipalities, local service districts and the province should go and thinks it will turn out being harmful to the rural part of the province.

"I don't see anything in there that benefits rural New Brunswick," he said. "I looked at this and talked to quite a few people and there's nothing there. Nothing they're offering."

Roberts said even though he would like regional service commissions to be involved in these talks, he thinks more guidance needs to be given going forward.

"They're telling regional service commissions they have a role, but I think we're all still waiting to find out what that role is," he said.

The Kings County Record reached out to the Department of Environment and Local Government for comment, but none was received by deadline.

Mild winter leads to colder-than-normal, rainy start to spring in Kings County

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SUSSEX • While Kings County enjoyed a warmer-than-normal winter, that won't be the case for the start of spring.

Environment Canada meteorologist Claude Côté said in an interview with the Kings County Record the start of spring will show below-average temperatures and lots of precipitation.

By the end of March, the region saw some near-normal temperatures and some above-normal precipitation, causing a lot of rainfall in the Sussex area. That will continue into April, he said, but near mid-month there will be a shift, with the weather getting dryer and colder.

"In the second week of April, we'll be back experiencing mostly colder-than-normal conditions," he said.

Sussex is in an interesting position, he said, right in the middle of the expected colder temperatures in the northern part of the province and the expected warmer temperatures along the Fundy coast.

"It doesn't point in any direction of above normal or below normal," he said. "It happens sometimes in Kings County where we may be in this transition zone."

This is a bit different than what Environment Canada was expecting for the province, he said.

New Brunswick experienced a warmer-than-normal winter, with predictions saying the spring would be the same.

"Right now, the signal for the spring was calling for above-normal conditions," he said. "So far, it hasn't been as mild as expected."

Côté said having this chilly spring



Spring is starting off colder than expected by Environment Canada this year in Kings County. PHOTO: TAMARA GRAVELLE/KINGS COUNTY RECORD

after one of the most mild winters on record can't really be explained and shows how unpredictable the weather can be.

He said one way to make this evident is the amount lack of ice that gathered on some bodies of water in New Brunswick. He said in the past few weeks more ice has gathered than during the whole winter.

"We were above normal in December, January and February," he said. "It almost seems like we're catching up on what we missed in March."

Côté also said the area should expect quite a bit of rain in the beginning of April, which will help prepare green thumbs for the season.

"But from mid-April onward there

are indications that conditions will be drying out somewhat," he said. "I'm sure farmers also don't want the soil to stay wet for too long."

After April, he said Kings County residents should expect above normal temperatures going into the summer months.

Côté warned the amount of rainfall could cause some flooding issues and warned for people to be vigilant and prepared for an emergency situation, especially after the 2014 flood in Sussex Corner.

"People need to pay attention not only to the precipitation falling but the rate of snow melt," he said. "There's always potential for some flooding situations, that's the time of the year it is."

Existing retail safe: report

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which owns McAllister Place; and OneREIT, which owns Lancaster Mall and properties on the west side of Saint John.

But John Williams, a senior partner at J.C. Williams Group who wrote the report, says he thinks the nature of The Crossing is much different than existing retail centres and that the proposed development would compliment them.

With its location near Route 1, The Crossing would draw in travellers that Saint John's existing retail centres don't easily capture, Williams said.

"It's much more related to the highway and related to things that people would be wanting to purchase or services they'd get as they move by," he said. "This will help lure them off and hopefully down into these shopping centres or best of all, hopefully downtown."

Williams said he didn't agree that The Crossing could threaten existing retail centres, as he think they serve a distinct purpose and are already well established in the city.

"They've got ample tenants, and they serve a different function," he said.

"They are a traditional, mature centre where you go shopping for half the day and maybe get something at the food court. The Crossing, as I see it visioned is more of a drive in, drive out, travel or shop and get it over with."

In fact, he said he thinks The Crossing would help strengthen existing retail centres.

"This will be the fourth leg on their table. This will actually further strengthen that knode in retailing in Saint John," Williams said.

"I think this will continue to build critical mass."

J.C. Williams Group is a retail consulting firm with offices in Montreal,

Toronto and Chicago that works with myriad clients from around the globe.

Joel Levesque, a spokesperson for Horizon Management, said the report confirms what the developer has been arguing all along.

"The report confirms Horizon's position that a mixed use development will be a welcome addition to the city and that it will compliment existing local retail," he said.

Land registration documents for the properties involved in the rezoning and municipal plan amendment show that the developer had been considering purchasing some of the land as early as 2005, even though it was not zoned for commercial development.

Levesque said this was typical of a large scale development like The Crossing, and that Northrup has been assembling the land for some time.

"These things take years to assemble the land, to get approvals, to do construction, to get tenants. It's an enormous effort to get these things done," Levesque said.

Levesque said Northrup was taking a necessary risk by buying up land that wasn't zoned for a large-scale commercial development.

"That's what entrepreneurs do. Entrepreneurs take risks. And smart entrepreneurs are usually able to achieve their goals. Some people lose money, some people make money. But that's what entrepreneurship is all about, taking risk and having a vision," he said.

The application was given conditional approval by the planning advisory committee at their last meeting on March 15.

City staff have asked that a number of studies, including traffic and environment impact, be completed before the project goes ahead.