



## **Town of Souris**

**Presentation to the Standing Committee on Community  
Affairs and Government**

**October 15, 2008**

**NEEDED: REGIONAL ALLIANCE FOR THE  
SOURIS CATCHMENT AREA**

We try to keep our heritage but we can no longer afford to live in the past. This about sums up the current state of the town of Souris. In the history of rural North America there are three identifiable eras of the small town:

1. The Small Town in Isolation
2. The Small Town in Mass Society
3. The Small Town in Global Society

Being a small town in the global society we are facing the phenomenon known as the reduced relevance of location. For towns like Souris this means that there is not much intrinsic in the location that will entice industries to move here. With easy access to transportation, some small towns can make a transition to a major economic structure transformation. In the case of Souris, which has been dependent on fishing and farming (once shipbuilding no longer ceased to be the primary industry), both of which have been suffering in recent years, we need to find ways to find the right transition.

In order to do this, we need community leaders and access to the proper type of development expertise so that we can map a future that will be sustainable. While this presentation is on behalf of Souris, the focus is on the entire catchment area. Little Pond, Chepstow, Eastern Kings Community, Souris West, Lower Rollo Bay, Bear River – well all of the areas in the Eastern Kings, or Souris catchment, area face the same issues.

The flip side of reduced relevance of location is that it is possible to change the focus of the community so that it will draw those who can benefit from the beauty and peace of the area. Ideas abound – a retirement community, a haven for the arts, a center for entrepreneurs...the list goes on.

However, and this is the point that needs to be made and understood immediately, in order to know the right direction, we need better input into the planning. We can no longer look to the past for guidance. For instance, when shipbuilding failed to be sustainable after supporting generations, the transition to fishing and farming was clear to see. These are resource-based just as the shipbuilding was.

Now we are short on resources both for industry and for leadership. In the last several elections, the Souris Town Council has been elected by acclamation. More than once, there have been last minute pleadings for a sixth person to run for Council. When you have to beg, plead, and call in favours to fill the Council seat, you know the town is in trouble. If we had not been able to fill the seats, the provincial government would have appointed our councilors for us. Talk about a great way to diminish the town's autonomy.

When a Council is constructed through whatever means, it has to provide town services and the cost of these services rests on government largesse and the backs of 700 taxpayers in the town of Souris.

Meanwhile globally, the isolated nature of rural areas such as we have in this area leaves all residents suffering. The way it is in a situation such as we have here is that the level of services becomes uneven among neighbours who are mere miles apart. The recent move to have high-speed internet in all areas of PEI is the first step in leveling the playing field. The Parents for Learning effort to bring a superschool to the area is another such step. This would provide our future residents with the tools to create and sustain the kind of area with the kind of resources that will make the catchment area economically strong and appealing.

Over the past year and a half, Souris has been meeting with the mayor and chairs of all municipalities in Kings County and we discovered that we all have the same concerns. Declining population, increased costs, aging sports facilities, and aging equipment for keeping our communities in repair.

And rather than work in cooperation, what are we doing? We are fighting for the same government dollars to keep our communities afloat. The not only diminishes the assets that each of us can have as we have to divide the government support among us all or take turns receiving our individual grants but it sets up a competitive situation where one community's gain is another community's loss.

For the catchment area, cooperation is our first and best hope. This does not mean taxes for everyone. This means sharing of our current resources. Souris needs the communities and the communities need Souris. A strong alliance among all communities incorporated or not, makes a much stronger political presence.

If we can find a way to extend the boundary covered by the town council so that the catchment region could be represented by all communities in a council that speaks not just for Souris but for the entire area, it would solve the problem of potentially having the provincial government appoint our next council and have that council undermined by the pressure of dealing with less than 30 percent of the people affected by its decisions. It would solve the problem of having to split the government support among all communities. It would overcome the feeling that when Souris receives a grant it is just for Souris. The resources in Souris are there for the entire area, not just for the town.

We do not have time to wait a decade for this change. While it may not take place in time for the next municipal election a year from now, it should be instituted before the following election. The old cliché applies to the economic situation in the eastern part of Kings County – united we stand, divided we fall.

Using another clichéd phrase, if not now, when? If not us, who? As much as we love our history and our heritage, it is a fact that unless we change the basic structure of how we look after what we do have, we will lose it. We need to learn from the past, not relive it.

The problem that Souris has is finding a sufficient pool for proper leadership. The problem that our neighbouring communities have is that they have no input into the largest community in the area and yet they are affected by decisions made here in Souris. As well, there are many Souris taxpayers who live outside the town and have absolutely no say in decisions that directly impact their businesses and their livelihood.

We desperately need to find a way to expand the boundaries to better meet the reality of a town that is slowly bleeding to death – if you don't believe us just look at the exodus to Alberta that leaves the area populated by single-parent families for much of the year. We desperately need to find a way to bring in the energy and vitality of the outlying areas to the leadership of the town so that we can work together to save the best of our traditional way of life and yet move forward as a strong and united region.

## **In Summary**

A regional alliance that expands the boundaries to create the greater Souris area (or the Souris catchment area) would provide the following essential improvements for the area:

- Movement toward the stated goal of the current government which is One Island, One Community
- Representation from all areas in the region and with more people, we would have more ideas and a diversity of viewpoints
- Greater control over growth in the region which would allow for expanded industrial development opportunities
- Streamlined bylaws to address problems over which the outlying communities currently have no control

## **THE BOTTOM LINE**

**Increased political power of Eastern Kings County. Five thousand voices can be heard much better than 1,200 voices.**