

Unprecedented opportunity ahead for the Fundy region

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COMMENTARY

There is an exciting and important opportunity ahead for the seven communities that make up the Fundy region.

It is an unprecedented opportunity to come together in ways that we have not before – to work collectively and collaboratively for an even stronger future for our communities and the people who live here.

The Fundy Region, nestled along the coastline of the Bay of Fundy and threaded by the Saint John and Kennebecasis rivers, brings together seven local communities: Fundy-St. Martins, Grand Bay-Westfield, Hampton, Quispamsis, Rothesay, Saint John and the Fundy Rural District.

As the chair of the Fundy Regional Service Commission, I have the privilege of working with leaders from each of the seven communities who serve on the board of the commission. It is on their behalf that I share these thoughts with you today.

The commission's role is to identify needs and enhance public services in these communities.

Stronger together

This is a new responsibility, and an important one. For the first time, the people of our region have the power to set public service priorities from regional public safety to community development.

Each mayor and council, and the Fundy Rural District's advisory council, is still responsible for their own community, but we now have an opportunity to look at ways to make us stronger together, whether it be through transportation linkages, newcomer settlement, economic development or other regional initiatives.

The commission's recently released regional strategy is the first step in this process. The strategy is designed to bring better public services and greater prosperity to all our communities.

We know from past experience that if part of our region is growing and doing well, there is a ripple effect on neighbouring municipalities. By working together, we can choose a path that reflects the needs and values of all our communities, supporting better public services through sustainable growth.

The commission's regional strategy provides a five-year road map from where we are in 2023 to where we would like to be in 2028. We based our deliberations upon three guiding principles: collaboration, innovative programming and extending the reach of services.

Improving services in region

We aren't here to duplicate services that communities are already providing. We're here to identify the areas where residents need services to improve, to propose evidence-informed solutions and to find ways of providing services that will ensure your tax dollars achieve the results that you and your neighbours need and want.

Perhaps the key issue in your community is securing new bus service between Fundy-St. Martins or Grand Bay-Westfield and Saint John. Maybe it's delivering affordable housing options or support services that make it easier for newcomers to join your community. Whatever the issue is, if it falls under our mandate, we can tackle it, propose policy solutions and find the way forward to improve services throughout the region.

And to be clear, our expanded mandate encompasses regional public safety, regional transportation, community planning and building inspection services, community development, economic development and tourism promotion, solid waste management and regional facilities.

Sustainable funding

Where regional services in these areas are possible and desirable, we will advocate for additional funding from the provincial government to help us deliver these services on a year-over-year basis. And not just a pittance of funding – sustainable funding that matches the scope of regional services.

The provincial government's recent decision to expand our commission's mandate represents the latest stage in the development of effective regional services. We are one of 12 regional commissions established across the province.

The early part of our work is going to involve a lot of fact-finding, discussion and weighing of options as we establish regional priorities. As we do this, there is a firm hand on the tiller – the commission's board, which is made up of elected leaders from the seven communities, and which is accountable to the residents we serve.

Engaged in seeking solutions

The Fundy Regional Service Commission could be the most powerful tool for implementing change that our communities have ever had.

Making the commission work for your community is as simple as asking, "What do the people of our region want in common?" and working with others to achieve it. At the committee level, some of the best minds in our region are engaged in seeking solutions – from councillors and local staff to subject-matter experts.

We want to attract people, we want to attract businesses, we want to attract population growth. We want to live in sustainable communities with effective public services and economic opportunities. In order to do that, we have to all be on the same page with a message that says we are ready for growth.

The Fundy Regional Service Commission is our opportunity to chart a course to greater prosperity for all communities and the residents of the region.

Libby O'Hara is Chair of the Fundy Regional Service Commission and Mayor of Quispamsis. For more information on the commission, visit www.FundyRegion.ca.

