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Canadian Rural Partnership Rural Dialogue

YOUNG LEADERS' FORUM 2007

Youth Speaks ... P.E.I. Listens!

RURAL DIALOGUE SUMMARY REPORT

Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island March 9-10, 2007

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For further information on the Rural Dialogue, please call 1-888-781-2222 (toll-free number).

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1. FOREWORD

This report is a summary of discussions that took place at the Young Leaders' Forum held in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island (PEI), on March 9-10, 2007. No limits were placed on the participants during discussions. In order to present a true report of the open discussions, recommendations made by participants that fall outside federal jurisdiction are also included. The views expressed do not necessarily represent those of the Government of Canada.

2. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The PEI Youth Network hosted the Young Leaders' Forum 2007 with support from the following:

- PEI Rural Team / Rural Secretariat (PEI regional staff)
- Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency
- Government of PEI's Population Secretariat
- *Réseau de développement économique et d'employabilité* (RDÉE) *Île-du-Prince-Édouard* [Economic Development and Employability Network of PEI]
- City of Charlottetown
- New Brunswick Youth Council

3. INTRODUCTION

The event was part of the Rural Dialogue, an on-going, two-way discussion between the Government of Canada and Canadians from rural, remote and northern regions. Launched in 1998, the Rural Dialogue is a key citizen-engagement component of the Canadian Rural Partnership (CRP). The CRP is designed to support a horizontal approach to rural development within the Government of Canada that responds to rural, remote and northern priorities. The Dialogue process helps the Government of Canada to better understand local and regional priorities, and provides rural, remote and northern citizens with an opportunity to influence government policies, programs and services that affect them.

In March 2005, the first Young Leaders' Forum was held with the goal of bringing Island youth, youth organizations and other youth stakeholders together to discuss ideas and provide suggestions that would enable youth across the province to work together towards common initiatives. A direct outcome of the 2005 Forum was the establishment of the PEI Youth Network which consists of youth members with diverse backgrounds from various organizations across the Island. In the months following the 2005 Forum, the PEI Youth Network held focus groups in each of PEI's three counties to determine the next steps for the Network. Responses from the focus groups indicated a desire among youth to hold a second forum that would provide young Islanders with an opportunity to: discuss key challenges faced by rural communities in PEI; and provide ideas and suggestions to help overcome these challenges.

The Young Leaders' Forum 2007 was developed with the suggestions from the focus groups as the basis for the agenda. Key issues for discussions were identified because they impact all members of a community, not only youth, and also because they are issues common to rural communities across Canada. The Forum brought together 51 participants, 36 between the ages of 18 and 29 years, and gave them the opportunity to discuss challenges and potential solutions. Ultimately the objective of the Forum was to identify concrete next steps to be taken by the Island's youth and the PEI Youth Network, in partnership with the Rural Secretariat's PEI regional staff, in order to move forward on the issues and challenges discussed.

4. ISSUES RAISED

This section summarizes the main issues and priorities discussed at the Young Leaders' Forum 2007. Issues are presented under four key themes around which the dialogue was structured: education; employment and economic development; immigration; and health and wellness. It should be noted that despite this categorization, many of the issues raised are closely interrelated and do not fall exclusively under one of these themes. In addition to key themes and issues, this section presents some recommended ideas, actions and solutions to address the challenges facing

rural communities in PEI and across the country.

4.1 Education

Islanders take great pride in their educational institutions. The Island's small size leads to smaller class sizes and provides an opportunity for students to get to know their professors and instructors and vice versa. Participants recognized that the Island's various institutions have much to offer; however, Island youth continue to seek options and opportunities outside the province. They were also aware that PEI is somewhat limited due to its size and that it is simply not feasible for the various institutions to offer a broad spectrum of courses, like those available in larger urban centres. The result is a significant number of youth leaving the province to pursue their education.

Participants offered several suggestions to help curb the number of youth pursuing their education off-Island. Foremost among these was the establishment of partnerships between the various institutions, and between the institutions and the public and private sectors. The partnership between Holland College and the University of Prince Edward Island was viewed as a successful collaboration that provides students with greater options. They felt that such partnerships could be expanded to include major institutions around the world. For instance, students could work towards a program offered by an international institution while attending a local school. Although this exists to a certain degree already, participants would like to see more partnerships created and promoted. Partnerships between educational institutions and the public and private sectors were viewed as an excellent way to expose youth to the opportunities that exist in PEI following their education.

The concept of civic education was also raised by participants as a means of increasing students' awareness of their communities and province. A curriculum that includes components such as being a responsible citizen and the workings of communities, cities, and the province would provide youth with a greater appreciation of what they already have around them. Participants thought that civic education should be offered throughout all grades, beginning in elementary school.

The participants expressed the need to expand the eligibility criteria of the "Islander bursary". Currently, Island students receive a rebate from the Government of PEI when they pursue post-secondary education in the province. Participants thought that this program should include a greater number of the Island's educational organizations, such as CompuCollege and Academy of Learning.

Finally, participants expressed that engaging youth and the community as a whole was key to ensuring that the Island's students receive the best education possible. This would provide administrators with new ideas and insights that could lead to great improvements of the education system in PEI.

4.2 Employment and Economic Development

PEI residents are very aware that young Islanders are packing up and moving to western Canada for better job opportunities than are available in PEI. Many youth are coming out of university, college and other learning institutions with strong résumés and yet they struggle to find quality employment. Participants said they do not expect their first job to be high paying, but rather fair paying. Pay is not the only factor youth consider when searching for job; participants mentioned that it is important that they find employment that makes use of their acquired education.

Finances are also one of the leading factors that force youth to leave the Island to find work. Upon graduation, students are often burdened with hefty student loans that they need to start repaying. Participants suggested that if they were offered incentives that would help them pay off their debt, youth would be much more willing to stay on the Island to work. Specific examples included bursaries or tax credits for youth who agree to work a certain number of years on the Island. It was felt that once youth were established in the Island workforce they would be less likely to leave.

Participants said that what they hear from governments, employers and the media regarding employment in PEI seems to contradict reality. They are told that there is a shortage of employees available to fill jobs or that certain industries - such as bioscience and aerospace - are rapidly growing and need qualified employees, and yet youth still have trouble finding meaningful employment. Not knowing where to look for employment was brought forward as a huge barrier. Participants would like to see the development of a single job search Web site for PEI, and that government encourage employers, particularly growing industries, to post jobs on this site. As job-seekers, youth often hear that only a small number of jobs are advertised, and that they must go from employer to employer with résumés or having connections with the right people to hear about the rest. This job search method may have been productive at one time; however, in an age where the Internet is the foremost communication tool among youth, participants felt it was time for a comprehensive job search Web site to be developed for PEI.

For the most part, participants agreed that if employment was available and accessible, they would choose to stay in PEI.

4.3 Repopulation (Retention, Repatriation and Immigration)

Youth out-migration is a common issue facing rural communities across the country. As highlighted in the previous sections, young people leave their communities in search of employment and education opportunities, or simply to travel. Once youth leave, it becomes difficult for communities to attract them back, especially when there are "better opportunities" in larger urban centres. Participants suggested that a central organization or network - such as the PEI Youth Network - dedicated solely to youth, would be the ideal channel of connecting young Islanders, living both in PEI and elsewhere. The Internet could be used as a key resource by Islanders (at home and away) to at least find out what opportunities are available to them in PEI. Ideally, this resource would serve as a way to encourage youth to come back and keep those already here by helping them become engaged in their communities and province. The point that participants wanted to emphasize was that they need something to make them feel connected to each other and to their communities.

Participants also brought forward the issue of immigration in PEI. They see, first hand, youth and their families come from all over the world and cannot have access to the needed services. It was recognized that although resources exist, more should and could be done to make immigrant families feel welcome and at home in PEI. Participants felt strongly that education plays an important role in teaching youth, and Islanders in general, how to be welcoming and accepting of newcomers. With regard to young immigrants, Forum participants were strongly in favour of a buddy system that would match children and youth new to the Island with someone of their own age within the community. This type of program could be implemented at all school grade levels, from elementary to post-secondary. If correctly promoted, participants felt that this program could be very successful as youth generally want to help in any way they can but often are not sure how to become involved.

4.4 Health, Wellness and a Green Future

Participants reported that they feel a strong link between health and the environment, two topics which are generally addressed separately by the media and by governments. A clean environment, in which they can thrive, contributes greatly to their overall well-being. They felt that this was especially true in rural regions, such as PEI, where residents place great value on their quality of life. Many of the youth were quick to point out several initiatives towards a cleaner environment and healthier society in PEI. For instance, the establishment of trails and public transit, as well as Waste Watch and wind power were highlighted as major initiatives which could improve the quality of life for not only youth but all residents of PEI.

Despite the great strides made in terms of health and the environment in the province, participants expressed that some barriers need to be overcome to offer Islanders the opportunity to live the healthiest possible lives in the cleanest environment possible. One of the major obstacles noted was that many of the province's towns and communities are not pedestrian and wheelchair-friendly. Many communities also lack sufficient sidewalks, making travel by foot or wheelchair unsafe. Even when sidewalks are present, snow removal is inconsistent often rendering the walkways impassable.

Participants used the discussion session to offer suggestions and ideas that could have a positive impact on health and the environment in PEI. Educating the Island's school children was of the foremost importance among participants. Although healthy eating, exercise and environmental responsibility are currently included in the school curriculum, participants felt that these topics should be emphasized at all grade levels in order to raise and maintain awareness among students. Supporting local producers was also considered to be a key component for several reasons, such as lowering greenhouse gas emissions as a result of shorter transport distances from producers to retailers. Finally, participants were firm about wanting the Island's pristine natural areas to be preserved for use by residents and for community activities. Green spaces offer Islanders a place to get active and are areas free of urban development, traffic and noise pollution.

Overall, participants agreed that the province's communities are moving in the right direction; however, much more needs to be done to make PEI an even greater place to live, breathe and thrive.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Participants repeatedly emphasized their willingness and desire to be involved in their communities and in policy and decision-making, especially when it comes to policies and decisions that affect young Islanders.

Participants overwhelmingly agreed that a central organization — such as the PEI Youth Network — is an essential resource for Island youth. This type of organization could be very valuable in providing access to information related to: employment and volunteering opportunities; local events and activities; educational institutions; and government programs and policies. Currently, youth feel somewhat lost in that they often do not know where to get the information they require. Participants felt strongly that if youth organizations, governments, communities, and other stakeholders partnered with the PEI Youth Network, the Network could play an important role in connecting youth with one another and with the Island. They also felt that the Network would be an asset to its partners by offering access to Island youth to: take part in surveys; provide input on policy and programs; advertise events; and share general information on Island youth.

With regard to the PEI Youth Network and to advance youth issues in PEI, participants highlighted the following areas as priorities:

1. Increase awareness of the PEI Youth Network.
2. Send the Forum report to the media and members of the Legislative Assembly.
3. Search for funding to hire a paid staff person for the Network.
4. Build a strong membership base for the Network.
5. Assess the NB Youth Council and take the necessary steps to achieve the status they currently hold with the Government of New Brunswick.
6. Meet with the Government of PEI to further develop the PEI Youth Network.

This last priority was viewed as key to the success of the PEI Youth Network. Currently, PEI is the only province without a minister directly responsible for youth. Participants felt that it is essential that youth be recognized by the provincial government and clearly expressed their opposition to being lumped under an existing mandate. While understanding that it is unreasonable to expect to get everything immediately, they also found it unreasonable of the government to continue to ignore the young citizens of PEI. Participants did, however, indicate their willingness to work with the provincial government and the PEI Youth Network in order to determine how they can best work together.

Youth represent a vital source of creative ideas and positive change for rural communities across PEI and across the country. With access to the right resources, youth, alongside their peers, can build a renewed connectedness with their own rural communities and can collaborate with governments, the academic world, youth organizations and other stakeholders throughout the province to build sustainable, welcoming and vibrant communities for residents of all ages.

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