

# Avalon Peninsula Regional Council Vision Development



St. John's

## What is a Vision?

This document represents a vision that has been created by the Avalon Peninsula regional council. It is intended to be a dynamic working document that will be adapted as: priorities are achieved, new priorities are identified, community engagement discussions prescribe and as the regions of Newfoundland and Labrador continue to grow and change. The vision will identify what citizens want to see in 15-20 years. Today that time frame is 2022-2027. In five years, that time frame will be 2027-2032.

As priorities are accomplished new priorities will be identified. This will provide an opportunity for us to be informed about what is moving and changing in our regions, where the next opportunity will be and where the next challenge will be. It will also provide a challenge for all involved to have faith in the process and realize that it will take time until these priorities are accomplished. It takes time to make significant change and it is important for this council to remain focused on the future, even in the midst of immediate challenges.

## Introduction

Over the past year the Avalon regional council of the Rural Secretariat has been engaged in discussions around changing demographics, lower birth rates, the need for enhanced skills, the importance of the private sector and Provincial Government

provision of services and infrastructure. These key topics have been the pillars of our discussions. Through these deliberations our council has emphasized our key values as a rural people and felt strongly that the road to regional sustainability is through greater collaboration and regional thinking.

The council has recognized that longer term thinking about where we as a society are headed is important. They also feel it has largely been absent from regional debates. Significant changes are facing us over the coming years to 2020. In order to begin debate on these longer term issues, the council has developed a vision of where they would like to see the region go in the future. The document is written from the perspective of someone looking back from 2020 and describing changes that have taken place since 2007. It is meant to stimulate discussion and thinking in the region around how we as a council see things changing for the better, if we work together to take greater control of where we are heading. In order for these changes to take place the council will need to influence policy, thinking and practice in the region, so that real positive change occurs.

From this vision document the council has identified three priorities for the coming year. These are skills

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## Rural Secretariat

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development, infrastructure and the environment. The discussions around these priorities are meant to begin the process of engaging the Provincial Government and citizens to find ways to influence policies and practice so that the vision can begin to be realized. They are the starting point of implementing our vision by influencing government policy, thinking and practice in our region. The council has begun this process by entering into direct discussions with line departments to better understand what Provincial Government policy currently is, and to begin to discuss how government and the council can begin to discuss priorities for the future.

## Our Values

We are a rural society, and in tackling outmigration, population decline and sustainability that we faced 20 years ago, we understood that our culture and values as a rural people were at risk. Our understanding of ourselves is based on our rural values of community, extended family, and safety. These values are the fabric of our culture and how we view ourselves and our communities. While change has been happening we have held to these values to ensure that as a people we have retained our culture and built upon our confidence.

It is often suggested that we need to urbanize to take advantage of having many people in a small space - clustering of people, firms and research and development. The challenge over the past 20 years was to have the advantages



Bay Roberts – The View Along the Shoreline Walk

of urban - high productivity, high educational attainment, while maintaining the advantages of being rural – core values of extended family, access to the traditional outdoor activities and safe inclusive communities. As a people we have been survivors, showing throughout our history resilience and perseverance in the face of major challenges. The challenge to our rural lifestyle was immense, but we knew that by drawing on our traditions, and pulling together we could maintain our core values and sustain our region.

## Major Themes

### Integrated Approach through Collaboration

In the early years of the 21st century, there was increasing consensus about the need for greater collaboration around social, economic, cultural and environmental development. There was also consensus that a sustainable approach was needed. Also acknowledged was the important role of skills development and strategic investments in infrastructure. While this was recognized for some time, the real work of bringing these facets of sustainable development together has mostly taken place over the last 20 years. The starting point was recognizing that no one had all the tools or answers, and that a more holistic approach was needed. Collaboration became the mantra, characterized by social dialogue, common regional thinking, consensus building, and fundamentally, an attitude change. The attitude change was key to getting people to accept that all had a role to play in facing the urgent issues at hand in rural Newfoundland and Labrador. What was needed was a framework that showed how we could move ahead and how each of the many players in regional development could contribute. This is the story of how we

reached consensus around that framework and succeeded in implementing it over the past two decades.

## Regional Approach

Historically Newfoundland and Labrador was settled on the basis of access to the inshore fishery leading to many small communities spread throughout the island and Labrador. These small communities became the backbone of the economy and the basis of the vibrant culture that we have inherited today. Over the past century needs and expectations changed, with demands for better access to services, infrastructure, and jobs. A whole host of factors led to declining and aging populations and this required that communities look at innovative approaches to sustainability. One of these approaches was greater collaboration among communities in order to build a more sustainable region.

There was an increasing sense of urgency about the long term impact of an aging population and the pull of resource rich areas of the country on local skilled labour and families. Though the situation was urgent, it was understood through the past lessons of resettlement that change had to be accepted and led by communities and not forced. Only local ownership would bring real change and only partnerships would lead to sustainability. While not all communities have survived, the region has grown stronger and the population has stabilized.

This was accomplished by facilitating and rewarding collaboration amongst communities. This worked – municipalities increasingly saw the benefits of working together when concrete gains were attached to this cooperation.

## Private sector key to economic development

The region recognized that it needed to strengthen the culture of entrepreneurship. There were

limited opportunities for business minded people around the key sectors identified as regional priorities. A number of initiatives were undertaken to move entrepreneurship to the forefront of development including educating youth earlier, incentives and celebration of rural entrepreneurs, and a stronger support for business development. These efforts have led to a more business friendly and supportive environment for the private sector.

The Avalon Region saw that there were many players in the economic field that were often pursuing similar goals in an uncoordinated way. This began to change. Groups and organizations acknowledged the key role of the private sector in job creation and the various support agencies began to coalesce around entrepreneurs to ensure the support was there for business minded people.

There was also recognition of the importance of the not-for-profit sector within the economy; and greater support mechanisms for the social economy were developed. In doing so, the social economy stayed true to its principles of benefiting the community while ensuring that it did not compete unfairly or unnecessarily with the private sector.

Collaboration led to concrete success. Government facilitated the growing number of business networks through cluster based support to research and development, export development and local product development, using successful local models from rural NL. This led to greater economies of scale in rural regions and helped rural firms compete against global urban firms.

More collaboration also led to greatly increased research and development, innovation, and design. In global markets this became crucial. Applied research was focused on our strengths. This approach had worked well 30 years ago both around the marine cluster in St. John's and in the development of the craft industry. Both are now leading export oriented sectors of the economy. Over the past 20 years applied research has become the blueprint for advancing agriculture and agrifoods, biotechnology, the fishery and other sectors. There has

been a greater focus on applied research and innovation through the university and the college system with close ties to industry players and government.

Exports and import substitution were acknowledged to be the key drivers of incomes in rural regions that would sustain employment, the service sector and regional public services. A more coordinated approach through labour, business, educators and government with support to export firms and organizations was undertaken. Regional targets for export development were set and over time have been met with the result that the region has significantly increased revenue flowing into the area from outside the province. There has also been real effort around replacing imports with local products, with great success in agriculture and other areas.

The importance of identifying international market needs and trends led to a greater focus on market research and design. Efforts were made to ensure that entrepreneurs were matched to market trends, both at home and abroad. Some real success stories have come in organic agriculture and fashion, where an understanding of international market trends led to business success. There was an acceptance that competition from low wage producers meant that local exporters had to look for niche markets based more on design, requiring more research and development and more innovative thinking. This reinforced the importance of creativity and the arts as crucial to success in business.

This work around markets and design has paid off. The region is exporting from a wider range of industry sectors, including agriculture, biotech, value-added in the fishery, crafts and other



areas. This has led to a greater sense of self-sufficiency and confidence in the entire region, particularly in rural areas.

## Highly Skilled Labour Markets

20 years ago our region faced real challenges around skills shortages in labour markets. This was particularly clear with our low literacy levels. This has been one of the greatest challenges facing our region, and one of our greatest successes. The importance of basic literacy to quality of life and long term growth was acknowledged, and goals were set and have been met. As a result literacy levels among the working population in the region are now reaching national standards.

Out-migration has been cited as one of the greatest challenges we have faced as a province. There was a strong pull to other parts of the country, particularly Alberta, due to high labour demand and high wages. It became evident that something needed to be done if we wanted to compete nationally for skilled people. While some have left over the past 20 years, quite a few of those became part of a mobile workforce who chose to work elsewhere but continue to call this region home, spending weeks away and returning for extended periods. Efforts were made to support those choices, and to ensure the families flourished under challenging circumstances.

The increased competition for skilled workers also opened up more opportunities at home and drove wages higher, making jobs here more attractive. There was also a concerted effort to make local wages more competitive through raising the minimum wage.

The important shift in thinking 20 years ago was to increase efforts to tie skills development to local opportunities. This led to community college and university research focused on regional development efforts. Education and training was linked to local employer needs, so that individuals could expect to find employment in the region and were more aware of local job opportunities in advance. This was done through better forecasting of labour demand and better planning, and ensuring that young people were making more informed decisions based



on local labour demand.

Efforts to increase the number of people involved in skills trades paid off. Through upskilling and lifelong learning, often workplace based, educators and employers collaborated to ensure that committed employees were challenged to take on training that would see them promoted to better positions thereby increasing productivity and wages. That has been critical to making employees committed to employers and the region. This has been carried out through the campuses of the college system in rural areas.

A major concern 20 years ago was the cost of attending training institutions for students, particularly rural students who had to travel to more urban areas to live. Tuition fees were among the lowest in the country, but the cost of moving to and living in larger centres was prohibitive. In order to impact this, loan and grant programs were designed to ensure that rural students faced no greater financial burdens than urban students who could stay home and live in a more cost effective way. This has increased the number of students attending both institutions and has lured many mature students to embark on lifelong learning, with the result that the regional workforce is among the highest skilled in the country. It has also ensured that students are not saddled with enormous debt levels that force them to higher paid positions outside the province.

## Investments in Infrastructure

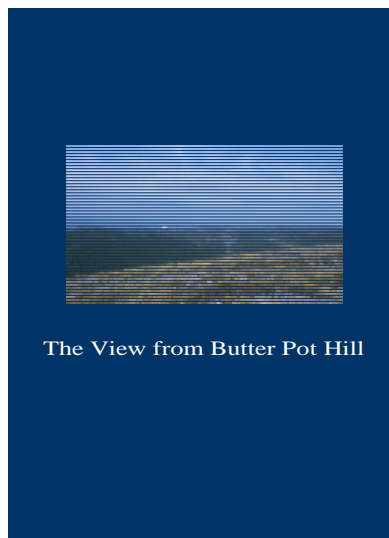
Today in 2020, infrastructure is seen as a key component to keeping healthy citizens working and living throughout the region. A key component of that is a transportation network connecting the region to ensure that people can move efficiently. Many people in the Avalon Region commute from their homes in one community to work in another. This commuting has been strengthened by modern road infrastructure, along with added public transportation to make commuting for employment within the region affordable and easy. Today the transportation is meeting not only economic but social needs.

It has been recognized that while all communities need basic infrastructure, communities with an economic base

need key investments to ensure regional employment sustainability.

20 years ago public infrastructure was failing after years of neglect and misuse. While more funding was available due to improved public finances, it was clear that priorities would have to be made since limited resources could not cover greater needs. The key policy change was to prioritize based on regional thinking, to invest strategically based on local strengths and to tie infrastructure to private sector development, skills development and regional public services. Again it reflects the integrated approach taken over the past 20 years.

Many community houses were being bought up as holiday retiree homes due to the scenic beauty and relatively cheap prices. This has been addressed through a comprehensive Land Use policy. These people are welcome, but the focus is now on year round residents who are committed to maintaining the vibrancy of their communities.



## Public Programs and Services

One of the key elements of sustaining rural areas has been ensuring access to public services. It was recognized that people need access to health clinics in their immediate area and specialized services in hospitals within reasonable distances. This has become more critical as populations have aged and health care needs have grown. This has been one of the greatest challenges of the past

20 years, and not all the issues have been resolved.

However progress has been made by focusing on the indicators of well-being and a preventative approach. There has been an emphasis on inclusiveness, keeping seniors involved in the communities and encouraging them to work longer and continue an active lifestyle with the result that current retirees are the healthiest our region has ever seen.

Today, quality of life issues are seen as imperative to sustainability. While health care is paramount on peoples' minds, access to many other amenities are also critical to a sustainable region: day care, public recreational facilities, public housing, and a wider array of government services are key to ensuring rural regions are strong.

There has been an attempt to ensure an integrated social model in public buildings, with schools, seniors' complexes, government offices, distance education and others all sharing buildings in rural communities. This has led to lower costs, but also meant that smaller groups of students can keep a facility functioning when coupled with alternative education delivery. These multipurpose buildings have also become the community centres with as many activities in the evenings and weekends as during the day. This has ensured that more is happening in our communities and these communities are more inviting and family friendly, which has been key to attracting new citizens from all over the world to the region.

There has been recognition that public services must be regionally based and not all centralized. This has meant that you might live in community A, shop in community B, go to a hospital in community C, send your kids to school in community D and work in community E.

## The Environment

Today, as the impact of changing weather patterns have become clearer, the importance of environmental stewardship has been made critically apparent.

Where the province once lagged the country on issues such as recycling and enforcement, we have now reached national standards. This is not only true of larger centres, but rural areas as well. Investments have been made where necessary and towns have now reached a level of affordability on environmentally driven waste management, energy efficiency, and emissions issues. This was accomplished through a series of incentives coupled with mandatory rules around recycling, energy use and emissions standards.

There has been a focus on ensuring that the basic services we take for granted, like drinking water and waste management, are up to the highest standard and reliable. Provincial Government and citizens take their roles as stewards of the environment seriously, ensuring that through consensus building and mandatory compliance, environmental issues do not take a back seat to development.

## Culture

It has long been recognized in this province that culture plays a crucial role in our lives by contributing to economic well being while adding to our quality of life. Our culture is the fabric that ties our people together and its critical home has always been in the outposts of rural NL. Few places in this country have a greater sense of identity with place and that sense has remained strong in the face of the trends of globalization and urbanization. Our difference and identity lies in our culture, and our sense of the prime value of that culture has today come to be seen as the driving force behind ensuring that rural NL continues to thrive.

In 2020 culture is both a source of quality of life and a credible industry with spin-offs for other industries. Today culture is a major export through artists, writers, tourism and performers. The vibrant culture of the province became the key driver in protecting the intangible heritage of rural NL.

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### *The Regional Council:*

The Regional Council is comprised of members from larger and smaller communities, males and females who bring a diverse background in experience and expertise.

To view a current list of the members, please visit our membership list on our website at:

<http://www.exec.gov.nl.ca/rural/RSR9.asp>

### *Photo Credits:*

St. Johns Cover – Name withheld

Bay Roberts – Mary Snow

Butter Pot Hill View - Mary Snow

## Rural Secretariat

(The Avalon Peninsula Region has two Regional Partnership Planners due to population)

### Jamilee Fitzpatrick

Regional Partnership Planner

P.O. Box 111

Placentia, NL

A0B 2Y0

Tel: 709-227-1322

Fax: 709-227-1602

E-mail:

[JamileeFitzpatrick@gov.nl.ca](mailto:JamileeFitzpatrick@gov.nl.ca)

### Ken Carter

Regional Partnership Planner

c/o College of the North Atlantic

– Rm 120

4 Pikes Lane

Carbonear, NL

A1Y 1A7

Tel: 709-596-8923

Fax: 709-596-5187

E-mail: [klcarter@gov.nl.ca](mailto:klcarter@gov.nl.ca)

**For additional information on the Rural Secretariat please visit our website at**

[www.gov.nl.ca/rural](http://www.gov.nl.ca/rural)

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