

The Geography of Governance: A Public Symposium
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Reflections of an ordinary Jane
by Jeannita Bernard

Good evening.

My name is Jeannita Bernard and I live in the Evangeline region... more specifically in St Philippe, which consists of 16 homes and is predominantly an agricultural district. I run a small hobby farm at my home and I also run a small cottage business in St Chrysostome ... actually on the border between St Philippe and St Chrysostome, so my business is 2 minutes from my house.

I have lived in the Evangeline region 60 + years and I have witnessed and been part of many changes and probably will witness many more.

The Evangeline region consists of 2 incorporated municipalities, Wellington with 407 residents, and Abrams Village with 267; and 12 unincorporated Villages/communities: St Hubert, St Gilbert, St Chrysostome, St Philippe, Egmont Bay, Maximeville, Cape Egmont, Mont Carmel, St Timothée, St Raphael, Union Corner and Urbainville.

So do we want to incorporate the whole Evangeline region? The question has been asked and discussed at least 3 other times in the last 2 decades.

There was also a public meeting held in the gymnasium of the Evangeline school approximately 25 years ago where the question was tabled and discussed and the idea of incorporation was promptly nipped in the bud!!!

Then in 1993, we had an exercise called 'Se Bâtir en communauté' ... Building our community. The challenges that led to the failure of this exercise were steeped in linguistic issues and, for those reasons, Building our community fell apart. Today, the language issue is a lot less sensitive than in 1993. And there is a lot more openness to the fact that the demographic profile of the Evangeline region is less homogenous and less unilingual... However one of the non-negotiables for the Acadians living in the region still remains. It is that the French Acadian cultural character be preserved.

In 2000, Le Regroupement des communautés, a body set up to group communities together, attempted the creation of a regional council... but it had no operational clout. The council was instrumental however in the realization of a housing co-operative in Wellington ... in other words the council took the lead and responded to a need. So a tiny piece of municipal responsibility was undertaken by this group with a Co-op being established to look after the operations of the project... And the Housing Co-operative exists to this day and still plays the same role. It looks after the housing needs of its residents.

This leads me to another perspective that I encountered in my many discussions. Some individuals felt that a regional council incorporating the already existing municipalities might serve the Evangeline region better than looking at incorporating the region. Municipalities could continue dealing with their operational agenda as they traditionally do, but a regional council could look after the bigger issues like economic development, job creation, tourism, housing, etc.

So the question... Should the Evangeline region become an incorporated municipality in 2016?

If I look at the viability criteria, particularly the one stating that the community needs to have a population of approximately 4,000 residents and land assets of approximately 200,000,000... we should not incorporate. We have a population of approximately 2,500 residents and I'm not sure that we meet the land asset criterion even though most of the region's geographical area could be considered farmland and the valuation of the existing farmland could very well be quite close to the stated amount.

Both incorporated villages, Wellington and Abrams Village, do not have major infrastructure within their boundaries, even though in our minds it may seem so. The example I would like to use is the rink. It lies within the incorporated boundaries of Abrams Village but is owned and run by La Commission de Récréation, which is a non-profit organisation representative of various areas of la région Évangéline , and not only representative of the incorporated community of Abrams Village. So a lot of La region Evangéline's developments have been brought about by organisations such as la Commission de récréation, a non -profit board. I will return to this point later in my presentation.

We have an aging population, just like any other community on PEI... particularly rural PEI. If I look at statistics for the 2 incorporated municipalities in Evangeline... Wellington 's population is quite larger than Abrams Village... Well, the Community care facility is there, the Housing co-op is in Wellington , and other private residential

complexes are being built around Wellington for people who cannot, for a variety of reasons, live in their homes any longer... so everyone is moving to Wellington!!

My question then becomes: Who will inhabit our homes? Who will attend our schools, and more importantly ... who will run our non-profit boards and our many organisations?

Well maybe an incorporated région Evangéline could provide some parts of the answers to these questions ... And really for us, the vibrancy of our Acadian cultural identity says it all... Numbers should be irrelevant for la région Évangéline when discussions around viability criteria take place... the driver for a positive discussion and outcome about incorporation needs to be the maintenance of our cultural, identity as an Acadian people.

If I look at municipal sectorial responsibilities and what that would mean for la région Évangéline, I can see light at the end of the tunnel. If I look at the economic sector, for example, I realize that no one is really leading this in our region. All efforts are disjointed and left to private entrepreneurs, Co-ops and non-profits. A lot of efforts are deployed by the francophone community provincially to ensuring growth and development of populations within incorporated municipalities like Charlottetown, Summerside, and Souris, for example... but no one is really leading the growth and development discussion of the Evangeline community which is still recognized as a vibrant Acadian cultural region.

We have been called the Co-op capital of the world... But you know we would have great difficulty hanging on to that title these days... The Evangeline Credit Union has merged with the Credit Union in O'Leary, and has a special arrangement with the one in Tyne Valley. The Wellington Co-op, our grocery store, has become Sobey's best friend... And our largest employer, The Acadian fisherman's Co-op, has just been sold ... Are we still the Co-op capital?? Not sure.

And in spite of the fact that we like everything to remain the same as it was... I think it's called ... an aversion to change... there is a recognition that certain things cannot continue as they were.

I forgot to mention... Since the bulk of our population is not getting any younger... we still have our housing Co-ops, our community care co-op... le Chez Nous ... and our funeral co-op! And a few others...

All to say that economic development and job creation opportunities are sometimes missed or overlooked because of a lack of focus and comprehensive planning for the Evangeline region as a whole. An incorporated region might mitigate that and really it

might help address our demographic decline... Really, if there is no work and no jobs, there is no community.

Economic development is closely linked to tourism and that is one area where the Evangeline region, in spite of its small size, has carved out a niche for itself within the provincial picture. It has branded itself as a culturally vibrant Acadian musical region... And I say 'region' when we talk tourism because we have had to find our exclusive niche within the current regional Tourism areas, and within the existing coastal drives... We have done this by way of the local tourism association with the collaboration of the 2 incorporated municipalities... It has been the result of really looking objectively at the region and its assets in order to push forward with a branding exercise which allows us to feature music and cultural identity as our essence. Tourism for us is a huge economic driver, and has been for a long time. So this branding exercise happened as a result of the work of a non-profit group together with the collaboration of the existing municipalities.

So, as you can see, I have given you examples of how efforts are deployed locally to enable developments in the Evangeline region that benefit the whole of the community, and this is without the formal incorporation structure ... so the region has a history of identifying needs and pushing forward to provide itself with the means to meet them. This latest exercise in branding is providing the framework to solidify ourselves as a culturally vibrant Acadian community, home to the many festivals and events that take place during the year.

Signage has been added to each little community with the musical symbols and houses representing all our districts what we stand for... this has been a collective effort.

The Evangeline region faces many challenges at present as many of its current organisations and associations depend on volunteerism ... Well, we are getting older as a community, our youth have all they can handle looking after their families and trying to make a living... and new residents have no idea about what makes us tick and no idea about the complexity of our organisational culture (or we think they don't!!) ... So who is left to sit on our boards????... Most of them are working boards and people are tired... This is an area where I think an incorporated region just might be of benefit. Volunteerism is not a sure thing anymore... we are encountering this fact every day. Clear responsibility for various sectors within an incorporated region might just help with this ever-growing challenge.

So, yes, some advantages are clear, but the most important, I believe, is the establishment of a voice for la région Évangéline with the Acadian cultural identity being at the core. As I have mentioned before, because we are a small province, there

is a lot of push for everything to be provincially based... However, la région Évangéline is not an Acadian francophone group within an incorporated municipality like we find in the cities of Charlottetown or Summerside. We are a culturally distinct region and we need a voice.

This is possibly the greatest argument I see to support the incorporation of the region... However, as we say, the devil is in the details... And in this instance, the devil is in the answers to the following questions:

1. What are the actual geographical boundaries that would delineate la région Évangéline? If we adopt Acadian cultural identity as a core value we would have to look at the old school districts as a starting point. This is certainly a discussion to be had.

2. Abram-Village and Wellington have 2 different tax bases. Do we create a third or do we build on what already exists... and, from an ordinary Jane's perspective, extending municipal boundaries usually means gaining a broader tax base. Am I going to be paying more taxes because I have a small cottage business and a hobby farm? Am I going to get street lights in St Philippe or am I going to have to pay for those that have just been installed in Wellington? ... Someone needs to tell me what is in it for me and why I need to support the incorporation of la région Évangéline...

3. How will the language issue be handled... as I mentioned, we have come a long way with that question... The community is a lot less sensitive when it comes to discussing language. However I need to be reassured that my Acadian cultural identity is respected, and in order to do that the French language has to figure front and centre in the incorporation charter.

4. How will existing infrastructures be handled ... for example... the rink... the Housing complex, and other infrastructure that already exists within incorporated municipalities, but doesn't really belong to them.

Who will operate them...? The municipalities??? At this moment a tremendous amount of fundraising is happening to support the rink. If the region is incorporated, will we have to continue raising money for something that is really the municipality's responsibility?... Oh yes... it could be through taxes!!!

5. How will land use be addressed... Approximately 80% of the land in the Evangeline region could be deemed farmland... What will it mean for my cottage rental business; what will it mean for my hobby farm, what will it mean for my neighbours who operate a dairy farm? In discussing this issue with individuals within the incorporated municipalities, the response was that you could have some control

over large agricultural operations being established near residential areas... In discussing with individuals outside the incorporated areas, the response was that good farmland should never be zoned as building lots!!!

6. How will my voice be heard? Will St Philippe have a voice?

7. How will existing surpluses or debts in the current municipalities be handled?

8. What does local governance mean? In speaking with different individuals, some felt that the old saying that we have in the Co-operative world says it all... L'union fait la force. There is strength in unity. And if we speak with one voice, we will have a voice. Some like to be governed by an entity that is close to them, close to the people, and subsequently would have a better understanding of community needs and interests.

Others have said, and I quote: This is a classic example of governments wanting to dump responsibilities onto municipalities. It is very clear that incorporating every region across PEI would simplify government's work. (end of quote). Islanders are known to call the Premier if they have a bone to pick... They certainly would have to call the mayor first if they wanted something done within their municipality!! Then maybe the Premier...

But getting back to my own little region and its potential for incorporation... It will take many months, perhaps years, of discussion before the big plunge. The questions I have brought forward as a result of my discussions and reflections will have to be answered... with clear responses. I am just an ordinary Jane and I have not participated in discussions sponsored by the Federation of Municipalities and others... so I need to be educated...

The one thing that is very clear to me, however, is that I care deeply about la région Évangéline and its Acadian cultural identity and I hope my grandchildren have the opportunity to experience it.

So if it takes incorporation, then so be it!!!

I would like to thank the Institute of Island Studies for inviting me to the symposium and providing me with the opportunity to speak about la région Évangéline.

Thank you.

Jeannita Bernard
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