

# Three Rivers could show way for amalgamation

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There are positive signs coming from eastern P.E.I. that seven communities are still considering the creation of a new regional municipality for their mutual benefit. A consultant's report released this week recommends the seven move forward on the proposal for the Three Rivers region.

The report was greeted without much comment, and in this case, that's a good sign. The word 'no' hasn't been heard yet.

Amalgamation is usually met with strong opposition from rural areas that feel they will be gobbled up, with higher taxes as the end result. Villages and towns feel it's time that rural residents pay their fair share for the services they offer and provide. The twains rarely meet.

The Three Rivers negotiations offer none of those threatening words or phrases that have scuttled talks in other areas - like annexation, higher taxes, pay for service and such. Instead, eastern P.E.I. has taken it slowly, quietly and at least for public consumption to date - mostly amicably.

The Three Rivers report concentrates on the positives, suggesting the regional option holds the greatest potential for maximizing economic development and creates the most efficient and effective administrative structure. Consultants suggest the new municipality is the most affordable and equitable option for all residents.

Many people are surprised that things have actually come this far, considering the strong loyalties of residents to local communities like Montague, Georgetown and Cardigan. Others in this great experiment include Brudenell, Valleyfield, Lower Montague and Lorne Valley - rural areas where municipal bylaws would protect them from threats posed by uncontrolled development. Each community is taking a measured approach to examine the report, discuss it and review it in the New Year.

Three Rivers, if the name is accepted, would become the fourth largest P.E.I. municipality with 7,744 residents and would provide a strong eastern counter-balance to the growing urban power of Charlottetown, Stratford, Cornwall and Summerside. The new municipality could spark strong population and economic growth, much like what happened in Stratford.

In Bedeque, there was early success when two neighbouring communities amalgamated but then the new municipality got over-zealous and started passing annexation motions. Nearby rural areas saw it as bullying. The same fate befell O'Leary, which suddenly announced plans to annex nearby rural areas, but faced a firestorm of opposition and quickly dropped that plan. Many rural

areas argue there is no benefit for them in amalgamation and just want to be left alone.

The Federation of P.E.I. Municipalities is generally in favour of the amalgamation process, a key recommendation of Judge Ralph Thompson's report that recommended reducing the number of incorporated areas on P.E.I. from over 70 to approximately 20.

While giving the process the green light, the federation is urging co-operation and consensus. It has developed a tool kit designed to provide a roadmap of tips and suggestions along on the way to avoid the pratfalls of earlier unsuccessful attempts. The federation is there to assist and advise – while hoping for the best.

The province has rattled the occasional sabre in recent months, signaling it intends to move forward on the Thompson Report, but hoping communities will co-operate without government interference.

Success in Three Rivers would be a godsend for the province. If seven communities can come together for mutual benefit, it signals the same can happen anywhere on P.E.I. if residents put aside backyard vision and look at the big picture. Talks in Three Rivers are still very tentative. The chances of success are hanging in the balance. There are so many reasons to work closer together that it would be a mistake to let this opportunity fail.

As the Paris climate conference was viewed as the last chance for planet Earth, the Three Rivers experiment might well be the last chance for regional co-operation on P.E.I. At least co-operation that comes from the grassroots and not ordained by government legislation.