

WEST PRINCE: A COMMUNITY PROFILE

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The 1997 Canadian Rural Restructuring Foundation's annual conference is being held at Rodd Mill River Resort, located in the region known as West Prince, the westernmost portion of Prince County. West Prince encompasses a total land area of 1,110 square kilometres and is comprised of Prince Edward Island's first thirteen lots¹, travelling from Lot 1 at the most westerly point of the Island. Although situated on a small land base, roughly 20 per cent of Prince Edward Island's total, the region is home to six very distinct communities: Alberton, Lennox Island, Miminegash/St. Louis, O'Leary, Tignish and Tyne Valley. The people themselves are a cultural mix of Acadian, Irish, Mi'kmaq and Scottish and combine to make a population of 15,755 residents, or twelve per cent of Prince Edward Island's total population (Lane 5).

Joanne Wallace of the Western Development Corporation describes West Prince as *a community of communities*, each of the aforementioned six possessing an individual identity. Tignish, for example, is recognized across the province as a "Cooperative Community," as demonstrated by the long tradition of formal cooperatives, a strongly supported credit union and the large number of non-profit groups which perform valuable work and services. The strong local sense of pride in these communities is demonstrated by the numerous community festivals held every year, and the great number of volunteers who participate actively in community and church life. Clearly, residents not only are concerned about their communities, but they also play a dynamic role within them.

Location

Geographically speaking, the location of West Prince creates a perception of isolation, of exclusion from the more populated core of the Island. Although Prince Edward Island is a mere 224 km long with a width ranging from 6 to 64 km, the elongated shape of the province does leave its extremities in relative isolation. Charlottetown, the province's capital, is a minimum 150 km away and Summerside, Prince Edward Island's other city, approximately 75 km. To those from larger provinces, these distances may seem negligible, but to Islanders, in particular those from "detached" localities, such distances are considered great. With a vast majority of employment opportunities available in close proximity to the two city centres, being situated on the periphery can be very disadvantageous. The new information technology is being viewed as a means of shortening the distance.

Politically, the region may also be perceived as being isolated. Again, physical distance from the provincial capital is an issue. Local residents feel somewhat resentful toward having decisions affecting their region made at such a distant locale and by centralized decision-makers, many of whom are unfamiliar with the area. Perhaps more important, though, is the lack of West Prince representation in the provincial government. In Prince Edward Island, like elsewhere in much of Atlantic Canada, people depend on government to create employment opportunities where few are available. Presently, there are no elected governing party members representing the entire region west of Summerside. As a result, West Prince residents are afraid that their concerns might be neglected.

Demographics

In 1991 Statistics Canada reported a marginal population growth rate of 0.4 per cent with an increasing outward migration of those aged 25 to 44 in the West Prince area. As a result, West Prince is home to a lower percentage of working-age adults than in the remainder of the province and the rest of Canada. (The percentages for residents of the 25 to 44 age bracket for West Prince, Prince Edward Island and Canada are 39, 41 and 45 per cent respectively.) Conversely, those aged below 19 years were more highly represented in West Prince at 33 per cent, in comparison with the Prince Edward Island average of 31 per cent and the national level of 28 per cent. The percentage over 65 years of age is consistent with the province at 13 per cent, yet higher than the national level of 11 per cent. Consequently, Prince Edward Island's predicament of brain/youth drain, in combination with greater percentages of elderly residents, is significantly more pronounced in West Prince.

Employment and Income

West Prince has a long tradition in agriculture and fisheries, both of which are strong industries integral to the local economy. Both also promote seasonal labour and food processing employment opportunities. These jobs, however, are becoming fewer with enhanced technology decreasing the labour-intensity of certain tasks. As well, the new potato processing plants built in the Kensington and Borden areas, close to the Confederation Bridge, have adversely affected the number of regional job opportunities. Consequently, fewer potato producers in West Prince are grading their own produce and hence fewer jobs are available. Opportunity does exist within these industries, however. *Royal Star Seafoods* is an excellent example of such possibilities. This new state-of-the-art fish processing plant, which has recently opened in Tignish, employs approximately 350 local residents during peak season. Future prospects for similar food processing plants are very promising.

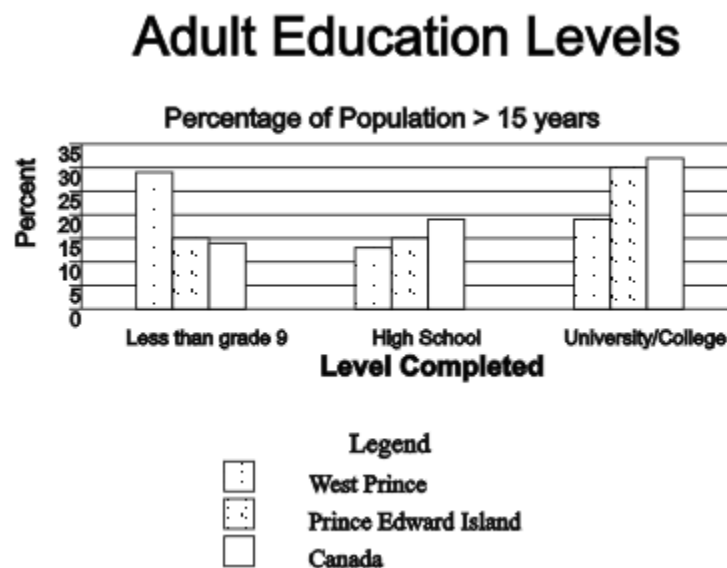
More recently, tourism has emerged as a strategy to generate more "wealth" in the area. Promotion of the region's pastoral landscape and construction of numerous tourist attractions have occurred in an attempt to lure more tourists west. The Rodd Mill River Resort itself is an example of such endeavours. The new developments have enhanced the area's attractiveness to tourists; in 1996, the percentage of overnight visitors who travelled to the area for cultural/historical reasons was approximately 18 per cent, significantly higher than that of the three previous years when the rates were consistently below 5 per cent (*Economic Impact: Tourism 1996* 112).

Yet, the unemployment rate remains the highest in the province, ranging from about 18 to 23 per cent. Unofficially, and perhaps more accurately, the seasonal rate is estimated by residents at a staggering 50 to 60 per cent (Lane 6). A high dependence on income assistance programs is a result.

According to Statistics Canada in 1991, the average household income for West Prince was \$36,000, not significantly below the provincial average of \$39,000, but considerably lower than the national average of \$46,000. Admittedly, these figures have been strengthened by the inclusion of Employment Insurance benefits. This dependence has been an economic benefit to the community in the past, but the future is not so promising. The recent changes in the Unemployment/Employment Insurance eligibility requirements may prove difficult to the community over the coming winter. Under the new system, twelve weeks of work allow an individual only 28 weeks of Employment Insurance benefits. This will leave a large number of people with no income for the remaining twelve weeks of the year. Whether one agrees with the practice of relying on EI to supplement seasonal employment is largely irrelevant. The reality is that, soon, many people are going to find themselves in a severe crisis: How am I going to support myself and my family? Some people will find other ways of creating an income. Some will relocate to Summerside, Charlottetown or perhaps Calgary in search of a brighter future. Others will be forced to apply for social service benefits. Either of the two latter approaches will prove detrimental to the community, draining the region's vital energy and destroying the community's sense of purpose.

Education

The following graph depicts a comparison of educational levels achieved by residents of West Prince, Prince Edward Island and Canada.



Source: Statistics Canada Census 1991 cited in Baker Consulting, 11.

The graph makes apparent the discrepancies between formal education levels attained in the three geographic areas. In particular, it highlights exactly how extreme West Prince's figures are. In fact, 60 per cent of the working-age population of West Prince have not completed high school. Unfortunately, this appears to be a continuing trend with only 45 per cent of residents aged 15 to 24 enrolled in school, versus the 55 to 56 per cent enrolled in the rest of Prince Edward Island and Canada (Baker Consulting 11).

Why are West Prince young people less likely to be enrolled in school? A definitive answer may not be possible, although location has been offered as one contributing factor. With a traditional dependence on agriculture and fishing, young people continue to be lured from the school system at an early age. A formal education is not a prerequisite for many of these vocations. There is little incentive to continue with one's education when the jobs in the area are largely labour-intensive positions requiring relatively little formal training. Having higher education does not substantially improve the odds of securing employment within the region. For the most part, those choosing to complete university or college are unable to find local employment that allows them to utilize fully their skills. The resulting options are discouraging: stay within the community but be underemployed; or relocate. For parents to encourage their children to continue their education is also to encourage them to move, perhaps great distances. This option is appealing neither to parents nor to children. West Prince, after all, is a wonderful place to live—why encourage others to leave? Losing the young and educated critically depletes the spirit of a community.

According to the July 1996 report, *Tough Challenges: Great Rewards*, 40 per cent of Prince Edward Islanders are able to read only simple materials, with 17 per cent not being able to read at all (Prince Edward Island ii). Although actual rates are not available for the West Prince area itself, one can reasonably deduce from the lower levels of education attained (see graph, page 4) that the region's rates are even worse.

In socio-economic terms, low literacy has severe consequences. "According to the 1986 census, those with less than a grade nine education have the highest rates of unemployment and earn an average annual income 30 per cent below the national average" (Prince Edward Island 4). When considering the high unemployment rates of West Prince, this seems to hold true. In addition, there are social and economic costs to low literacy levels:

- illiteracy hampers businesses' ability to train employees, make use of new or advanced skills, introduce new technology and remain competitive;
- illiteracy restricts the Province's ability to attract financial investment needed for economic growth and development;
- illiteracy affects personal income, health, safety, child development and social, cultural and civic activity (Prince Edward Island ii).

Clearly a disheartening cycle is in effect. Lower education leads to fewer employment opportunities, which in turn lead to less incentive for pursuing a formal education. And, with today's increasing technology comes a greater demand for a literate pool of labour. It is, then, even more critical that the cycle be broken.

Community Reaction

In response to these literacy and education shortcomings, community groups in the region are taking matters into their own hands. Community volunteers see the great need to try to reverse the present trend. Consistent with the cooperative mentality of the area's residents, partnerships have evolved among health, education, economic development and the labour force; as a result, the region has been recognized as Prince Edward Island's leader in forging such linkages. Five learning centres have been established; these have been much in demand by area residents. By October 1, 1997, these centres will be upgraded to Opportunity Centres providing literacy instruction, health information, job search and interview skills, small business information and access to job banks using the Internet. Independently operated, each centre will develop as deemed relevant by the local community.

In addition, many training and educational programmes are being offered in the communities: both Holland College and Prince Edward Island deliver programmes and courses, and Laubach Literacy is assisting in upgrading literacy skills, and Distance Education programmes are being investigated. In February 1997, the West Prince Regional Community Learning Committee commissioned a report entitled *Community Education: A Strategic Plan for West Prince*. Community Education, as defined by the report, acknowledges learning as a "life-long process" and as a tool "to educate, enrich and empower individuals, families and communities." A Youth Employment program has been developed to aid young people in making the transition from school to work. Community Access Program (CAP) sites have been established in five communities, providing access to and assistance with technology, in particular, the Internet. There are six elementary schools, two junior highs and one high school in West Prince; their facilities are available to and increasingly utilized by all community members. Organizations such as West Prince Health and Kids' West address parenting and family issues, and promote a wider, more holistic definition of health. A majority of West Prince's six main communities also have "community development boards." These groups are community specific, some addressing sustainability, others employment.

Future Outlook

The challenges appear daunting. The situation as described could be seen as an excuse for pessimism. However, the people of West Prince are not so easily discouraged. Rather than focussing on the challenges faced, they instead focus on their strengths. As stated earlier, West Prince is a community of communities, each possessing a strong identity. Intensely loyal and hardworking, community members recognize their individual responsibility to community affairs; hence, the level of volunteerism and community participation is very high. People are proud of their communities and are willing to help others in times of need. As well, the strong resource base, the tourist sector and the knowledge economy should not be forgotten. The determination of the people and the resources available make a most promising combination. The only question is: "What is the next step?"

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Notes

1 In the 1700s, after the British took over the Island from the French, Samuel Holland surveyed the colony in 1764-65 and divided it into 67 townships of about 20,000 acres each. These townships were popularly known as "Lots."

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