

CBRM's Population Crisis

The Cape Breton Regional Municipality (CBRM) has been experiencing a population decline since the early 1960's but for the first number of years the decline was quite modest. For example, between 1965 (when CBRM had a population of 130,000) and 1985, the CBRM's population declined by approximately 6,000 people.

Unfortunately, in recent years, an increasing momentum has set in that seems to be growing in strength each year. In fact, during the past thirty years, the average annual decline in population within the CBRM is approximately 1,000 people. To put the significance of this figure in context, this is equivalent to losing the community of Louisbourg every year.

The scale of this decline impacts every organization and institution in the community. And with the closure of schools, organizations, services, and critical infrastructure, our region deteriorates and becomes a far less attractive place to live for people of all ages.

Individuals who think that this reality does not negatively impact their future in Cape Breton are badly underestimating the strength of this force. People who think the decline in population will somehow resolve itself are willfully ignoring more than fifty years of history. This is only going to stop if we act and make population stabilization a top priority.

It is important to recognize that based upon most recent annual estimates, of the fifteen economic regions in Atlantic Canada, two thirds, including Cape Breton are experiencing significant to severe population decline.

Of the five regions that are growing, four are regions containing the provincial capital cities and the other region is the Moncton region.

Expressed differently, only one of eleven non-capital economic regions in Atlantic Canada is currently experiencing positive population growth.

This suggests very strongly that there is a significant political/governance component involved in the demographic trends across Atlantic Canada.

Within Cape Breton Island, all counties are showing significant population decline and some of the least populated counties are showing the most rapid relative declines.

The good news is that the First Nation communities in Cape Breton are all showing population growth; however, this growth is not sufficient to offset the decline that is occurring across all other communities.

In total, the island as a whole is losing a community the size of Port Hawkesbury every three to four years and the majority of this decline is due to out-migration. Furthermore, the median age of the population in Cape Breton is approaching fifty years.

However, the other significant piece of good news for those who care about the future of Cape Breton is that our neighboring island has very successfully implemented a population strategy and PEI has experienced both significant population growth and significant employment growth in recent years.

Average annual immigration levels in Prince Edward Island are approximately ten times the level of immigration to Cape Breton, and PEI's level of total employment is now more than 40% greater than total employment in Cape Breton.

Prince Edward Island within a period of fifteen years has surpassed Cape Breton in total population even though Cape Breton is 80% larger than PEI in land mass, and the economic data suggest that PEI's immigrants have been very successful at creating new opportunities.

In 2001, Cape Breton's total population was approximately 14,000 people larger than PEI's. By 2014, Cape Breton's population had fallen by 19,000, while PEI's population had risen by 10,000, mostly due to immigration.

PEI has not stopped net annual domestic out-migration from the island to other regions of Canada; however, their international immigration is consistently well above the level of out-migration to other regions of Canada and, therefore, PEI is growing.

The critical question is: can Cape Breton match PEI's success?

Within Nova Scotia, the vast majority of international immigrants settle in the capital region. Only a few dozen immigrants find their way outside the Halifax Regional Municipality on an annual basis and many of these individuals find that the services that they require are not readily available.

Cape Breton's total immigration from international jurisdictions is on the order of 100 people per year.

This level of immigration needs to be significantly increased if we are to be able to stabilize the population.

Our relatively low level of immigration is not unexpected, though, because we are dedicating only very limited resources annually to immigration.

In fact, CBRM is investing more money each year purchasing and watering flowering plants that it is on supporting any form of a population stabilization strategy. This would seem to be a case of misplaced priorities during the past four years.

The CBRM must dedicate itself to a robust population stabilization effort, with an emphasis on immigration. This is a natural complement to my tax reduction strategy aimed at making the region a more competitive economic environment for residents, investors and business owners.

My commitment is that, if elected, CBRM would commit \$1 million per year to a population stabilization effort that would be managed by the Cape Breton Partnership.

Over the years, the Partnership has worked very well with all municipalities in Cape Breton and the organization has been very effective in accessing federal and provincial funding contributions for their various initiatives.

My hope and my goal will be to have investments in this fund from all municipalities in Cape Breton and from the senior levels of government, with a total target of least two million dollars (\$2 million) annually for the next four years. For CBRM and for Cape Breton Island, the time to act is now.

Across our entire region, we desperately need to work together, overcome any abiding cynicism and apathy, recognize the immensity of the challenges that stand in our path forward, and dig in to make things much better in all aspects of our economic and society.

We can and must do better!