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Burton and Greater Geary residents invited to learn about community options

BURTON AND GREATER GEARY (NB): While the four communities of Greater Geary and the communities of Burton appear separate on maps, few people realize that both areas are actually considered the same area by the provincial government, according to Trevor Hanson, chair of the non-profit Greater Geary Association (GGA). “These groups of communities are actually part of something called the Burton Local Service District, or LSD for short, which organizes our local services like fire protection and garbage pick up. In the 1960’s, large rural county governments (like Sunbury County) were replaced with smaller rural jurisdictions called LSD’s that followed old Parish boundaries. Burton LSD is essentially Burton Parish, which at one time included all the area from Burton, through Oromocto, and Greater Geary.” The development of the Town of Oromocto and CFB Gagetown in the middle of Burton Parish resulted in Burton and Greater Geary being no longer physically linked, but still considered together. “Burton and Greater Geary remain together to this day, though not many people are aware of that or understand why.”

It was the desire to learn more about local governance that led Burton resident Mary Mesheau to get an informal group of interested citizens together to talk about an official advisory committee for Burton. “It was our hope that our small group could start a larger discussion on this in Burton. Most LSD’s have an elected advisory committee which provides citizen input to those in the provincial government that arrange our local services. The process for organizing an official committee is quite easy. Any citizen can get a list of 25 names together who support the idea, then a community vote is called by the provincial government. However, as we were doing our research, we found out that an elected advisory committee would not only represent Burton, but the communities of Greater Geary as well.”

The implications of that, according to Hanson, are what got the GGA involved. “Mary is a former teacher of mine and she knew I was involved with community activities in Greater Geary, so she gave me a call to see what I thought about the process. We both agreed that there are challenges of having two groups of communities not physically connected trying to vote for one committee, which is probably why efforts were unsuccessful in the past. The GGA has studied local governance issues for a while. Our opinion was that any kind of community vote on this issue could be quite divisive since not everyone understands the LSD system or how a committee could represent two separate areas.” Hanson also cites the challenge of what would be distributed to households in advance of a vote for a committee. “An official advisory committee may be a great idea if undertaken in the right way, but if you get something in your mail in Geary, French Lake, Haneytown or Waterville that says you’re voting for a committee in “Burton LSD”, it could be quite confusing.”

Representatives from the GGA and the newly named Burton Interested Citizens Group (BICG) chaired by Mesheau got together and decided the best way to proceed would be

to jointly organize two community information and consultation sessions, one at the Geary Lions Club on May 31st at 7pm following the GGA Annual Meeting, and one at the Burton Lions Club on June 1st at 7 pm. “We wanted to get the communities together to talk about this issue,” said Mesheau. “We’ve invited the representative from the provincial government who organizes our local services, Peter Kavanagh, to give a presentation at each session so people can learn about what an LSD advisory committee does, where the money comes from to pay for local services, and what local services are provided.”

Following the presentation, there will be a roundtable discussion facilitated by GGA and BICG on the merits of organizing an LSD advisory committee for Burton LSD. This roundtable will catalogue people’s questions and concerns. Hanson continues: “The main thing will be to see if it makes sense to make use of the existing system. If not, could things be changed for it to make sense for our communities? Are there other options to consider or are people happy with the status quo? Ultimately the citizens decide, we’re just trying to get discussion going.”

Hanson indicated that some people have suggested Greater Geary and Burton should be their own communities with official local representation, like a mayor and council. “That idea has merit, but there are cost implications everyone really needs to understand. This may also require policy change by government. That’s why the outcome of the discussions will be a brief that will summarize all the discussion and concerns, which we’ll send to the Department of Local Government, and make available to everyone interested to get consensus on next steps.”

Both groups hope that these sessions are well-attended and look forward to the discussion. “The goal will be to ensure everyone improves their understanding of how their Local Service District works and that any issues are resolved well before any kind of formal process is ever initiated,” said Hanson. Mesheau summed up the exercise: “Whether an LSD committee is desired or not, or whether people want separate communities or not, it has been a long time since any public discussion has taken place, and we look forward to hearing what people have to say.”

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