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## Rural non-profit community group weighs in on local governance debate

**GREATER GEARY, NB.** A rural-based non-profit community group is offering a different perspective on the local governance debate currently taking place in advance of September's election. "We believe that most of the discussion has been on how to streamline service delivery in rural areas, but we believe more discussion is needed on how to enhance citizen engagement in rural areas and how to make it easier to organize" according to Trevor Hanson, Chair of the Board of Directors of the Greater Geary Association Inc (GGA). The GGA is a non-profit group speaking in support of the 3000 citizens of the four communities of Greater Geary (Geary, French Lake, Haneytown and Waterville) located in the southern half of the Burton Local Service District (LSD), adjacent to Oromocto. "The Burton LSD now has over 5000 people with no local voice in terms of an Advisory Council, and because it is geographically split in two (Greater Geary and Burton) by the Town of Oromocto, it complicates any kind of local governance discussion. We have worked with the Burton Interested Citizens Group (BICG), a group speaking in support of Burton citizens, to seek improvements to local governance in Burton LSD through an incremental approach of intelligence gathering and community dialogue."

The implications of reports such as the Finn Commission are that sweeping changes are needed, but according to Hanson, an incremental approach may be very effective in the long term. "From our experience in trying to engage our communities in discussion on local governance, we feel there are a few legislative and policy changes in the short term which could go a long way to enhancing local rural governance in the long term. First, the government could make it easier for LSD's to organize an advisory council, which could include eliminating the need for citizens to vote on whether they want a council. In the municipality system operating without a council is not an option. Why should rural areas be different? Second, the government could make it easier for communities of interest to incorporate by eliminating the need for LSD's to remain contiguous and by eliminating the mandatory tax increase associated with incorporation. The biggest obstacle we've seen to organization is fear of increased property taxes, even if such a tax increase is small. One possible option could be that the provincial government could cover the cost of incorporation until such time as the community tax base has grown enough to cover the cost without increasing taxes."

The GGA sees challenges in moving too fast with sweeping changes. "The challenge we see is more from a citizen engagement level," said Hanson. "For years, many rural New Brunswickers have not been part of an organized structure that facilitates local decision-making. If a new system is developed, will it actually engage the unrepresented New Brunswickers at the local level or will it simply be a reorganization of New Brunswickers already engaged in their communities? In our opinion, for local governance changes to be effective in the long term, more efforts need to be taken in the short term to engage citizens in the existing mechanisms before introducing anything new."

The GGA has been working with the Burton Interested Citizens Group (BICG) and jointly prepared a report to the Department of Local Government on two open house meetings held in each part of the LSD to determine the citizens' perspectives on organizing. Hanson states that progress can be made by addressing the fears that people have about organizing. "If our experience in Burton LSD is indicative of the experiences of others in rural New Brunswick, the LSD system is still a mystery to quite a few people, and for those that do understand it, they find it confusing that an advisory council is optional for LSD's. For some, the fear of increased taxes keeps them from wanting to see any enhancements. We also have the unique situation where two groups of communities are not physically connected yet are expected to work together on matters of "local" interest, like recreation. We feel the system can be workable in the short term by working with the local people to create a structure, but this will require legislative and policy changes. Most importantly, there needs to be dialogue."