

The Georgetown Conference, Rural Redefined

Leveraging the collective power of community newspapers to rethink rural Atlantic Canada

Presented at Newspapers and Community-Building Symposium XIX,
Co-sponsored by the Huck Boyd National Center for Community Media
at Kansas State University, the National Newspaper Association
and the NNA Foundation
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The Georgetown Conference, Rural Redefined is to take place in Georgetown, PEI, Canada, Oct. 3-5, 2013, is the brainchild of Newspapers Atlantic, a regional association representing 70 predominately rural community newspapers, with a combined weekly circulation of 730,000. Newspapers Atlantic is Patron Sponsor of the Conference.

The Georgetown Conference will bring together 250 ‘doers and producers’ from throughout Atlantic Canada to generate and share ideas – and to redefine ‘rural’. They will share regional success stories and best practices, and learn about innovations elsewhere in Canada and the United States. They will go home with expanded networks and new resolve. The Conference aims to enable the next generation of ‘doers and producers’ and to demonstrate the power of community newspapers to lead change. The ultimate objective of the Conference is to revitalize rural communities.

Paul MacNeill

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The Vision Statement of Newspapers Atlantic reads simply: To build vibrant local media.

The Association's Mission Statement reads: Newspapers Atlantic is dedicated to the excellence, credibility and economic well being of its members through advocacy, leadership, education and communication.

But what if many of the communities served by its 70 member publications, stretched out over Canada's four most easterly Canadian Provinces, are not vibrant? What happens to community papers when the communities they serve struggle with economic realities that threaten their very existence? Can the collective power of the community press be harnessed to effect real change in rural communities?

Atlantic Canada is considered a have-not region, meaning provincial governments rely on transfers from the federal government to provide basic services including education and health care. Government is considered, in many communities, a primary industry along with the traditional economic lynchpins of fishing, farming, forestry and tourism.

All are under siege.

Governments everywhere are slashing programs, services and jobs, a reality that disproportionately negatively impacts rural communities. Communities in Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador have witnessed the closure of community schools, rural emergency rooms and hospitals and government offices.

Main Streets that were dotted with independently owned stores 20 years ago have declined as shoppers flock to box stores in urban centres.

The population in rural Atlantic Canada is aging. Our youth are lured to larger centres that hold the promise of a secure future or to provinces such as Saskatchewan or Alberta, rich with natural resources, where it is not uncommon for a 20-something to earn a six-figure salary operating heavy machinery.

Proportion of persons aged 65 and over					
	N.L.	P.E.I.	N.S.	N.B.	Canada
1972	6.1%	11.0%	9.2%	8.6%	8.1%
1982	7.9%	12.3%	11.1%	10.3%	9.7%
1992	9.8%	13.2%	12.6%	12.1%	11.6%
2002	12.4%	13.8%	13.8%	13.4%	12.7%
2012	16.6%	16.4%	17.2%	17.0%	14.9%

Source: Statistics Canada. *Table 051-0001 - Estimates of population, by age group and sex for July 1, Canada, provinces and territories, annual (persons unless otherwise noted), CANSIM (database).*

Newspapers Atlantic Board of Directors comprises editors, publishers and advertising executives with first hand knowledge of rural decline. In January 2012, Paul MacNeill, a long-serving Newspapers Atlantic board member and winner of the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors' Golden Quill Award (2002) plus a record nine "Golden Dozen" awards

from the Society, pitched the idea that the Association should put its money, resources and editorial clout behind an initiative aimed at resetting the dialogue about and within rural communities. The argument went if community papers are not prepared to step up and lead, who else will? The reality is rural communities cannot rely on government whose agenda too often drifts to appease areas of larger population.

Community newspapers are on the front lines of rural decline. After a brief discussion the board unanimously approved its support and The Georgetown Conference, Rural Redefined was born.

Why Georgetown? The Challenge and Imperative of Redefining Rural

Georgetown, Prince Edward Island, population 675, is the capital of Kings County. A sandstone courthouse and welding training centre for Holland College, the provincial community college, dominate its Main Street. The biggest employer is Seafood 2000, a seasonal lobster processing plant that employs 250, including more than 100 foreign workers.

In 2007 the sawmill closed as a result of a downturn in the U.S. housing market and high value of the Canadian dollar. Thirty-three jobs were lost.

At its peak Georgetown Shipyards employed 115 tradespeople building everything from tugs for the Panama Canal to Halifax-class frigates for the Canadian Navy. Today the yard sits mothballed, the majority of its skilled workers left to find work in other communities or provinces. Georgetown hopes it will benefit from a massive \$25 billion modernization of the Canadian navy, but the program is already overdue with no definitive start date. Even if Georgetown wins a portion of the contract it will be years before any work commences.

In the 1990s the community boasted four general stores and two gas stations. Today, only one store remains. Economic reality is making life very difficult for the town's Mayor and Council. This year it was forced to slash \$70,000 from its budget to avoid hiking taxes. Both the street and sidewalk budget and recreation budget were cut in half.

"For a small town, these cuts mean a lot," Mayor Lewis Lavandier lamented. "We're struggling to keep our heads above water."

Yet there is pride of place. Modest bungalows are colourful and well kept. Lawns are neatly manicured. Residents rally to support those in need or volunteer to ensure key infrastructure, such as the rink, remains operational despite the minor hockey program slipping to just four teams and less than 50 players. When the school board attempted to shut the local school, Georgetown fought back, winning a reprieve.

This is why the town of Georgetown was selected to host Rural Redefined: its resilience. The issues facing Georgetown are problems shared with communities in all four provinces. There is also a very practical reason for choosing Georgetown; it boasts the infrastructure necessary to host a large regional gathering starting with the playhouse with its modern sound equipment, plush 286 seats and a recently added kitchen and meeting area that is ideal for hosting break outs and coffee breaks.

A history of the playhouse states 'the original playhouse, built in 1887, was unique in the idea that a county seat should have a town hall that would house both the Town Council meetings and those community and cultural events that knit together small communities and make the long winter nights bearable. Two years later a train being improperly shunted on the tracks across the

street leapt the road and crashed into the hall. In compensation the railroad installed a large and ornate window to fill the hole left by the train.

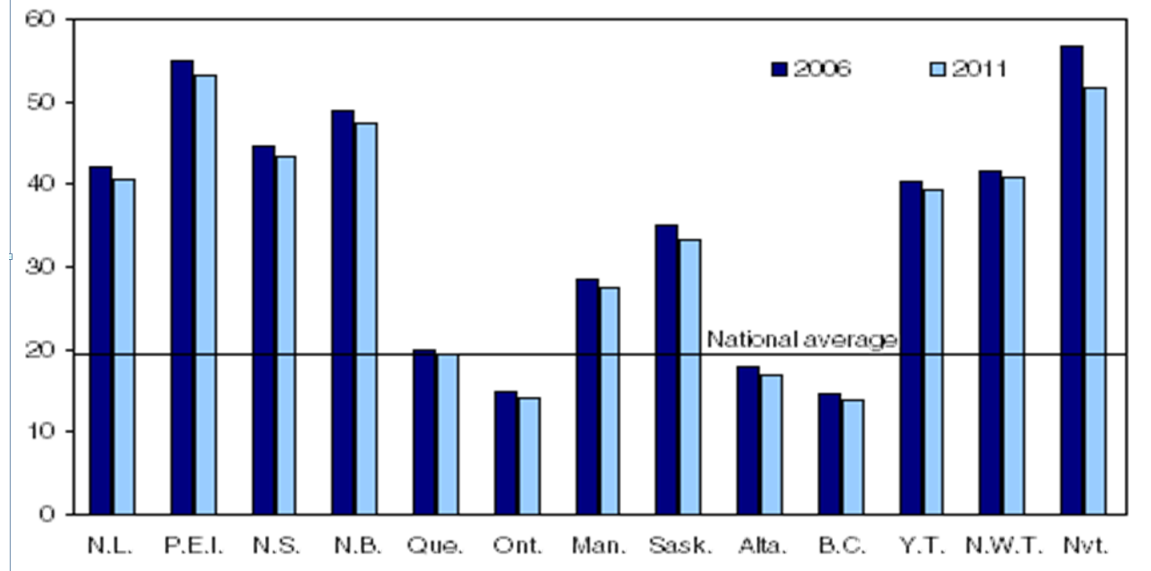
Both professional and semi-professional touring groups came to Georgetown, playing out of trunks and picking up locals for bit parts. A Georgetown amateur society was formed and joined the growing ranks of local players on the island who toured church halls and community centres. To this day Playhouse has a local community theatre group, the King Players.

During a storm in March 1983 the Playhouse burned to the ground. The community wasted no time coming together to raise the funds to rebuild using the original plans with some additions and updates. Thanks to the hard work of the local residents, the Playhouse reopened in July of 1984. In its over 120-year history, the King’s Playhouse has never missed a season.’

Six kilometres down the road is Rodd Brudenell River Resort, lead accommodation for the conference. The Rodd is a modern resort with 120 guest rooms and two golf courses. The Conference meetings will all take place in Georgetown, at the Playhouse, or at breakout sessions at the early 20th century courthouse or the town’s four churches. This will be an opportunity to feature Georgetown’s heritage and community infrastructure. The evening banquets will be hosted at the Three Rivers Arena in Georgetown and at the Curling Club in nearby Montague, which is the largest municipality in King’s County with a population of 2,000. The meals will be catered by local community organizations, and the Conference will be assisted by local volunteers, meaning that all measures are being taken to keep costs down and to ensure that Conference dollars are widely distributed.

Few rural communities can boast this combination of infrastructure necessary for such a large undertaking. Just as important, in terms of the suitability of Georgetown, or for that matter Atlantic Canada, to host this conference, PEI has the highest proportion of rural residents of any Canadian province, and Atlantic Canada is far-and-away the most rural region:

Proportion (%) of population living in rural areas, by Canadian province/territory.



Sources: Statistics Canada.2006 and 2011 Census.

Four provinces, 70 newspapers, one effort

Newspapering is a competitive business. We compete for advertising revenue with radio, television, Internet, shoppers. We compete for readers. The most effective industry associations are those that see big picture issues and target a unified response for the betterment of the whole membership.

Created 41 years ago as a means for independent publishers to meet and exchange ideas, Newspapers Atlantic has evolved into a modern association that provides a full pallet of services to a membership that is now majority corporately owned. Together Brunswick News and Transcontinental own 54 of 70 member titles. The association is operated with a staff of four.

The board of Newspapers Atlantic agreed to provide seed money of \$25,000 plus \$10,000 to create a conference website: <http://www.thegeorgetownconference.ca>. Equally as important is a commitment by member papers to support the conference with both editorial and advertising space.

Organization of Georgetown, to be held Oct. 3-5, 2013, benefits from the full organizational support of the Newspapers Atlantic Executive Director and staff. However, organizing a conference on the magnitude of Georgetown is beyond the capacity of a small newspaper association. Immediately following board approval it was determined that leading Atlantic Canadians should be recruited to act as conference co-chairs. This brings numerous benefits:

- 1: Credibility. Each co-chair, one from each Atlantic Province, is highly successful in their chosen field. Because they have added their name and credibility to the organization, the conference is not perceived as newspapers creating an event to promote newspapers. However, community papers are receiving significant halo benefit for the leadership and initiative shown.
- 2: Fundraising. Our co-chairs are deeply respected in the Atlantic Canadian business community. These connections were vital in driving our sponsorship efforts that have topped \$175,000 and guarantee our ability to deliver a Legacy for The Georgetown Conference.
- 3: Independence. From the very start Georgetown was perceived as a discussion independent of government, meaning it will not seek any financial support or request government input into the agenda. Our co-chairs are recognized regional leaders without the baggage of being elected officials, thus helping to create a buffer for the Association, as 'Presenting Sponsor.'
- 4: Perspective. All our co-chairs live in rural Atlantic Canada. They understand the big picture but also the reality of life in small towns. This wisdom has helped shape the conference agenda.

Our Co-chairs:

Prince Edward Island: H. Wade MacLauchlan is President *Emeritus* of the University of Prince Edward Island, where he served as President from 1999 to 2011. Previous positions include Dean of Law at the University of New Brunswick, and professor of law at Dalhousie University. Mr. MacLauchlan lives at West Covehead, Prince Edward Island and has been involved through his family in various sectors, including tourism, the fishery, agriculture, construction, retail oil and gas industries, and cable television.

Nova Scotia: John Bragg, President and Co-CEO of Oxford Frozen Foods Limited, and Chairman of the Bragg Group, which includes regional cable television and communications provider Eastlink. Bragg lives in his native community of Collingwood NS, and is the largest employer in nearby Oxford, as well as serving on national corporate boards such as Maple Leaf Foods and the TD Bank. He has been the Chancellor of Mount Allison University and currently serves as a member of the Nova Scotia Commission on the New Economy.

New Brunswick: Gilles LePage, Blueberry farmer and former CEO, Mouvement des caisses populaires acadiennes (MCPA) was named “One of the 10 Canadians Who Make a Difference” by *Maclean’s* magazine in 2003. Mr. LePage has been actively involved with economic development as Chairman of the Conseil économique du Nouveau-Brunswick, Vice-Chair of the NB Investment Management Corporation, and as a Director of the Bank of Canada. He has been Chair of a regional health corporation and a member of the Board of Literacy New Brunswick.

Newfoundland and Labrador: Donna Butt, Artistic and Executive Director of Rising Tide Theatre became involved in theatre as a member of the Newfoundland Mummer’s Troupe. Ms. Butt has been a driving force in Newfoundland theatre for thirty years, through Rising Tide Theatre based in the historic fishing port of Trinity, and touring performances throughout the province. Ms. Butt has led collaborations in tourism promotion and rural economic development, and has been active in the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council.

To expedite conference planning, a management committee comprising Co-chair MacLauchlan, Publisher Paul MacNeill and Executive Director of Newspapers Atlantic Mike Kierstead was created. The day-to-day organization of the conference rests with this group, assuring direct newspaper involvement in crafting the conference agenda.

The Georgetown Conference was announced to Newspapers Atlantic members in May 2012. From the outset it was positioned as a vehicle to change perceptions of both our communities and our community newspapers. It had an immediate impact on many of our employees who were jubilant that community newspapers ‘are finally doing something.’

Newspapers Atlantic’s 70 members boast a combined weekly circulation of 735,000 in a region with a population of just 2.3 million. For more than a year member papers have driven awareness of the necessity to redefine rural through both advertising and editorial content.

The first test of pooling our collective strength occurred in the fall of 2012 with a coordinated advertising campaign to publicly launch The Georgetown Conference. Full colour ads were run at no charge in member papers. Ads were augmented with supplied editorial content that could be tweaked to include local voices. Awareness is maintained through weekly advertisements supplied by member papers as part of the association’s Blanket Classified Program, for example:

**Join The Discussion
Help Shape The Future of
Rural Atlantic Canada**

In October 2013, ordinary Atlantic Canadians from all walks of life will gather in Georgetown, PEI with a shared purpose of identifying issues and developing solutions to reinvigorate our rural communities. Join the discussion, shape the future.

*The
Georgetown Conference*
Rural Redefined

www.thegeorgetownconference.ca

One individual. One idea. One action. One community at a time.

A communications committee, comprising senior community press editors, built on the concept of content sharing by pushing profiles crafted for <http://www.thegeorgetownconference.ca> as well as distributing content generated locally to member papers.

In late July a second full page ad was run in member newspapers, this time promoting delegates and speakers. A particular objective of this ad was to recognize and thank Conference Sponsors.

The Georgetown Conference
Rural Redefined

Zita Cobb, Speaker, NL
"We believe that there is a future for rural communities and that future is built on innovation, resilience, optimism and the ability to adapt."

John Bragg, Speaker, NS
When asked how to reinvent Atlantic Canada, Georgetown co-Chair and business icon John Bragg has a clear answer: "One community at a time."

Gracen Johnson, Delegate, NB
"Our cities, suburbs, and countryside could all benefit from a reconnection to rural and better integration with each other."

Duncan McIntosh, Delegate, PE
"I'm going to join conversations with some of our innovative, passionate leaders in a diversity of industries and activities."

The Road to Georgetown is paved with Great Ideas

250 'doers and producers' from across Atlantic Canada will converge on Georgetown, PEI October 3-5 with a singular goal: Revitalize rural communities.

Real people. Real ideas. Real action.

www.thegeorgetownconference.ca
<https://twitter.com/Georgetown2013> www.facebook.com/GeorgetownConference

Patron Sponsor
NEWSPAPERS ATLANTIC / JOURNAUX ATLANTIQUES

Gold Sponsors
UNIVERSITY OF PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND, MEDAVIE BLUE CROSS, MEDAVIE EMS, McCain, IRVING, STEWART MCKELVEY, sobeys, eastlink, SHANNEX, Seaboard TRANSPORT, Scotiabank, OXFORD

Silver Sponsors
CREDIT UNIONS, WILSONS, CRA, 140, MRSB, KPMG, LOUNSBURY, MAIN STREET MALL, Clearwater, Hyndman and Company Limited, zero point

From the very early stages we believed that Georgetown would benefit the quality and substance of editorial content generated by member papers by spurring discussion on issues that previously may have gone unreported or underreported. The conference in no way attempts to guide or control content generated by member papers.

The *Bridgewater Bulletin* embraced the idea. Weekly, under the banner of the Georgetown Conference, it publishes stories examining the local economy, its strengths and what it needs to grow. Content includes profiles of businesses that are succeeding. Says Publisher Lynn Hennigar:

“We started running our profiles last October using Small Business Week as the launch. In order to be featured on the page you need to fit what we call "the Georgetown" model - essentially we are profiling successful businesses as examples of what works. So we profile:

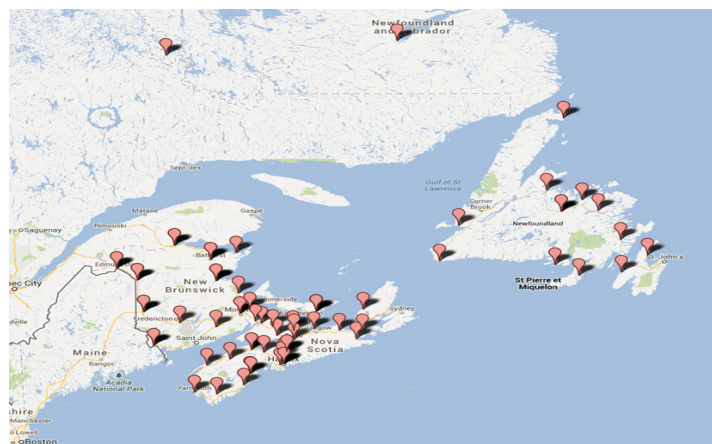
1. Long-standing businesses from the point of view of their longevity and community contribution, expansion.
2. Traditional industries or businesses that have continued to thrive or that have found a niche. For example we have a local home builder who has tapped into the seniors market and has single-handedly reversed the trend in Mahone Bay and grown our population.
3. Immigrants - businesses they've started and how they have adapted, barriers and successes.
4. Young entrepreneurs who have bought or started local businesses because this is where they want to live and/or raise their families.
5. Non-traditional businesses that technology now makes possible - people can work from anywhere.

These reports are often more about the story of the business owner, how they got here, what motivates them etc than simply about the business.”

While one community paper has undeniable strength in a single community, media buyers, governments and the general public are often ignorant of this strength.

Newspapers Atlantic believe the collective leadership role of community papers can ultimately be monetized by positioning Newspapers Atlantic, in a parallel process to the conference, as the engaged, relevant, opinion leaders of rural communities.

As of this writing, the Board of Directors of Newspapers Atlantic was awaiting completion of a strategy containing specific steps to elevate awareness of community papers to key constituents such as leading regional and national businesses, government and ad agencies. Part of the strategy will outline ways of showing our collective power. For example, the board discussed potentially simultaneously running blank front pages, or front pages with minimal text. Such an effort would create a social and traditional media buzz national in scope and drive home the collective reach of member publications. The following graphic, showing the geographic distribution of member papers throughout Atlantic Canada, illustrates the power of the Association’s collective platform:



Engagement: One Individual, One Community At A Time

At its core, The Georgetown Conference is about empowering individuals to take a single idea to bring about change in their home community, with community newspapers acting as the conduit. It was evident early on that the concept was resonating.

Conference proceedings will be held at Kings Playhouse, a Victorian Gothic style building that boasts being the longest continually operational theatre in Canada. Its modern sound system and comfortable seating make it an ideal venue for the 250 ‘doers and producers’ the conference will attract from across the region.

It would be very easy to include a Paypal link on the conference website and open registration on a ‘first come, first paid, first served’ basis. Instead, we have opted for an application process that requires prospective delegates to ‘Express Interest’, and respond to five questions:

1. Name
2. Home community/area
3. Notable community/rural involvements [list 3 or 4]
4. Describe a particular community/rural involvement [e.g., business, community initiative, other] that 'redefines rural' or opens up future options for vital rural communities.
5. How would you benefit from and contribute to The Georgetown Conference?

These questions effectively separate the wheat from the chaff. We want to attract individuals with the desire and ability to change realities in our rural communities. Some are business people. Some are artists. Some are activists. Some are volunteers. Some are youth. Some are seniors. Some are New Canadians. All are engaged.

To further build upon the ‘doers and producers’ concept, each approved applicant is asked to write a 200-word essay on ‘Why I’m going to Georgetown.’ A photo of the author and the essay are included on the conference website. The essays are inspiring snippets from engaged Atlantic Canadians like Nadine Duguay: “I grew up in Tracadie-Sheila, a rural community located in north-eastern New Brunswick and have lived in many rural communities in my life. I embrace ANY community who finds its niche and potential and showcases it to the world. The Town of Caraquet is an excellent example of this as it is a hub for gastronomy, arts and culture, and has positioned itself as such on the international scene. I believe that there are great examples of collaboration in rural areas that should be duplicated in other regions. I am going to this conference because I want to remind people of those examples and to focus on our rural areas even though the world-wide trend is towards urbanism.”

The Road to Georgetown

The Georgetown Conference will attract the ‘doers and producers’ from across the region. However, the partnership with Newspapers Atlantic affords a unique opportunity to drive thinking at a local level.

The *St. Stephen Courier* did this in spades in late April.

McAdam, New Brunswick is a sleepy village of 1,400 located in the southwestern corner of the province just 10 kilometers from the United States border. Built as a key railway hub, McAdam

was decimated when rail service was eliminated 30 years ago. Today area residents are attempting to rebuild as a tourism destination.

Partnering with the village council, *The Courier* hosted a non-partisan brainstorming session at the local Lion's Club. Tables and chairs were set up. Paper and pencils were provided. The Mayor pointed out that the meeting was not intended to debate the pros and cons of any idea. The merits of each idea will be debated in the future when all ideas are reviewed by working groups of residents.

Given the opportunity to express their own ideas, town residents filled the hall to capacity. More than 225 people showed up. The meeting quickly slid past its two-hour allotment and generated a staggering 100 talking points and suggestions.

“When a small group of us held a pre-planning meeting, we figured we might have 50 people show up – that was the number of respondents to a survey issued by the village, and it seemed a safe number,” says *Courier* Editor Vern Faulkner.

“On the night of the town hall meeting, a small group from our paper arrived at 6:30 to start setting things up, and there were 20 people there. At 20 minutes to seven, another 10 had filed through. By 10 minutes to seven, we started grabbing chairs to put out: there were only 60 chairs set. By five minutes to seven, we were running out of chairs: there were 200 available. In short, I was stunned.”

The meeting resulted in a spike in community engagement that is directly attributable to the local community newspaper piggybacking on The Georgetown Conference.

The discussion in McAdam is just starting. More than a dozen residents stepped forward to volunteer in the creation of ‘action groups’, focusing on topics such as tourism and business development, to begin the process of putting ideas into action.

“I see a lot of opportunity for the village,” said Mayor Frank Carroll in *The Courier*. “I see some good things coming out of this,” said Mayor Frank Carroll.

Faulkner also believes the initiative can help the paper into the future.

“It’s worth noting that McAdam is on the periphery of our coverage area. We’re actually trying to grow in that region. The community reaction was muted, but positive – in part because our past coverage of the area hasn’t been potent. That said there is potential from a subscription point of view that we’re exploring, and our continued work in that community on this project may help us grow.”

Antigonish, Nova Scotia

The *Antigonish Casket* took a slightly different approach. It organized a community discussion without first engaging the local council and built the event around success stories and the opportunities that will present themselves given the demographic realities facing the community.

Located less than two hours from Halifax, Antigonish is naturally positioned to solidify its position as a regional hub, said an economist based at St. F.X. University.

Antigonish already boasts solid infrastructure. Its university is highly respected and it is home to the regional hospital for the Strait Area. Both could spur economic growth, he told the 100 in attendance.

Seniors are drawn to retirement areas with solid health care. Combined with the region's reasonable housing costs and close proximity to the ocean it is possible to position Antigonish as a retirement haven, or even a weekend getaway for city dwellers.

Casket Editor Brian Lazzuri says feedback was very positive. "People want to hear about positive things happening in our area. People want to hear about success stories in rural Nova Scotia." However, "I was profoundly disappointed that not a single municipal politician attended the event. A fact noticed by many of those in attendance. I do not know if this shows the apathy of our local government in working to promote and assist business," he said.

Stellarton, Nova Scotia

Pictou County's economy ebbs and flows based on the market demand for the industrial products or natural resources it produces. Be it coal mining or ship building, the economy is often in a boom or bust cycle.

Lately it's been bust.

Enrollment in county schools is down 1,000 since 2004. Youth are migrating for work elsewhere. Traditional industries are struggling. In response, *The Pictou Advocate* hosted a brainstorming session that attracted more than 60 people, including 23-year-old Nick MacGregor, who grew up in nearby MacLellan's Brook and is now working in the family business, MacGregor's Machinery. Nick is a delegate to The Georgetown Conference.

"Since I graduated from community college, I have been interested in developing Pictou County. I see a few things that hinder our growth and I want the county to progress," he told the meeting. "We have a lot of industry, but there are also a number of issues we are facing, like the fact that we need to attract and retain youth. It saddens me because I know there are businesses in the area struggling to fill jobs and there are many people in need of jobs," says MacGregor. "We have an opportunity as a county to think globally and grow in a global market." The crowd agreed with what MacGregor had to say, as well as his comment that, "there is a lot of negativity around Pictou County. We all need to work on celebrating our victories in business and other aspects."

Montague, PEI

The *Eastern Graphic* is the defacto host community newspaper for Georgetown, which is located 15 kilometers away from the paper's offices in Montague. In the lead-up to the conference, the paper launched several initiatives to spur discussion in its coverage area. Among them it is hosting community meetings similar to those created by the St. Stephen Courier.

In late July, *The Graphic* published a special section entitled "The Georgetown Letters". Dozens of Islanders were asked to write a letter focusing on what actions can be taken to improve life in either their community or province. Current residents and Islanders who have been forced to move away participated. The Letters were non-partisan in nature. The only politician asked to pen a submission is PEI Premier Robert Ghiz.

Submissions offered a wide range of thoughtful perspectives and ideas from individuals not normally asked to offer their opinion publicly. Peter MacDonald, a Ford dealership owner, spoke of the difficulty in operating franchises in rural areas under rules written for urban centres. Mark Ledwell, a senior lawyer now based in London, England, outlined 10 specific action points to improve the provincial economy. Melanie Taylor, a small theatre owner and mother of four, wrote about the imperative of children following a proper diet and exercising. Fourteen-year-old Brooks Roche offered a call to action: “In order to revitalize Atlantic Canada’s rural areas, sacrifices must be made. We will need to adapt and make changes to our way of life, some severe and some simply unfamiliar. If anyone can thrive in these circumstances, it’s us.” Chef Michael Smith, star of Food Network Canada, has built an international brand while living in rural PEI. He asks powerfully ‘When did we give up?’

The only politician invited to speak at The Georgetown Conference is Alberta’s Minister of Municipal Affairs Doug Griffiths. His invitation is not for anything he has accomplished in the political ring, but rather for the 2010 book, *13 Ways to Kill Your Community*, that he co-authored with Kelly Clemmer, Editor-in-Chief of the *Star News*, the community newspaper in Wainwright, Alberta. It is a powerful primer for anyone interested in gauging the relative health of their community. With chapter titles like Ignore Your Water, Shop Elsewhere, and Reject Everything New, *13 Ways* is as relevant in Atlantic Canada as it is in Alberta.

The Graphic decided to capture the essence of 13 Ways and build momentum for Georgetown and community discussion at the same time by creating 13 ads depicting each chapter title with the addition of a locally produced catch line. When the series is complete, just prior to the conference, all ads will be republished collectively. Ads are also promoted on the paper’s website.

THE ROAD TO GEORGETOWN

13 Ways to Kill Your Community

WEEK 1, CHAPTER 1
DON'T HAVE QUALITY WATER
...We are what we drink

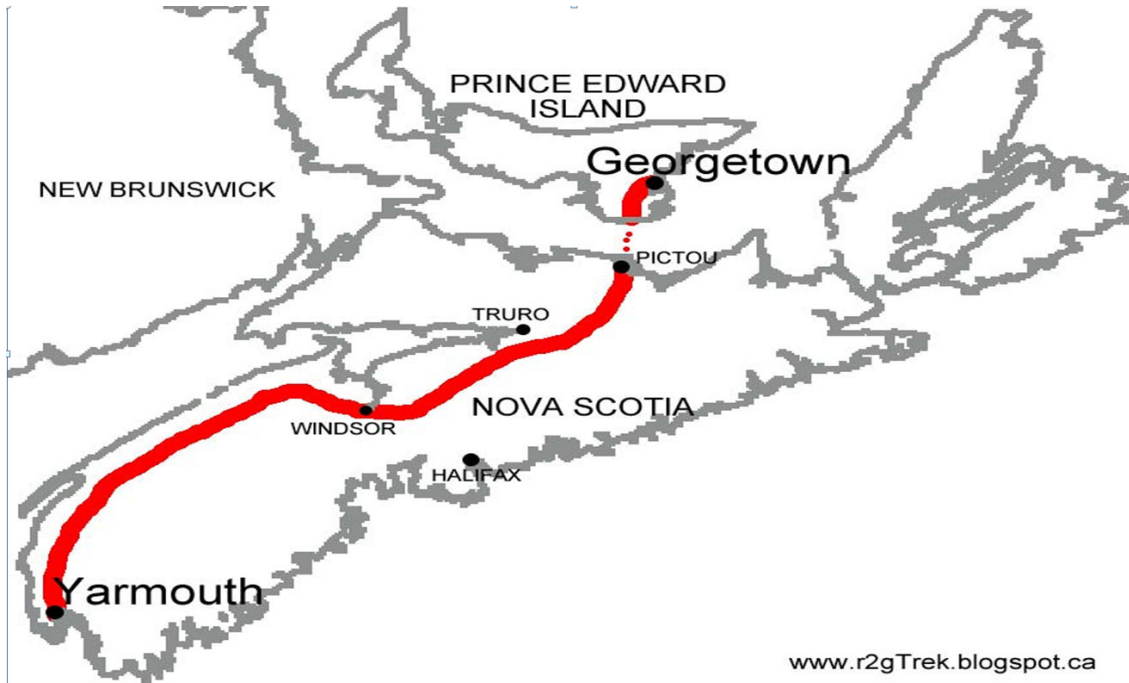
The Georgetown Conference
Rural Redefined

LET'S START TALKING
OCTOBER 3 TO 5, 2013 • GEORGETOWN, PEI
thegeorgetownconference.ca

This ad is inspired by 13 Ways to Kill Your Community written by Doug Griffiths and Kelly Clemmer and published by Frontenac House Ltd. of Calgary. Mr. Griffiths is a keynote speaker at The Georgetown Conference, Rural Redefined, October 3-5
Ad sponsored by the Eastern Graphic

Yarmouth to Georgetown

Perhaps the most inspiring story of the impact Georgetown is having on individuals belongs to Bob Maher and Edward Wedler. In September they will begin a 500 km trek from Yarmouth to the Georgetown Conference all the while ‘collecting and sharing stories about rural people, rural communities and rural life along the way.’



The *Yarmouth Vanguard* reports: Their decision stems from a one-day event, sponsored by the *Annapolis County Spectator*, that was held in Lawrencetown, Annapolis County early in May. The <http://www.road2georgetown.blogspot.ca/p/storytellers.html> brought together local storytellers, who shared their views on things that might change the way people work, live or play in rural Nova Scotia. So compelling was the discussion that it left Wedler and Maher wanting to unearth, collect and share even more stories.

And so was born the Storyteller’s Trek on the Road to Georgetown. During their trek, Maher and Wedler want others to share their rural stories and to think what “redefining rural” means to them. Along the route, they are building in time to speak at community functions. Where possible, they will follow trails supported by hiking groups and rural roads going through communities.

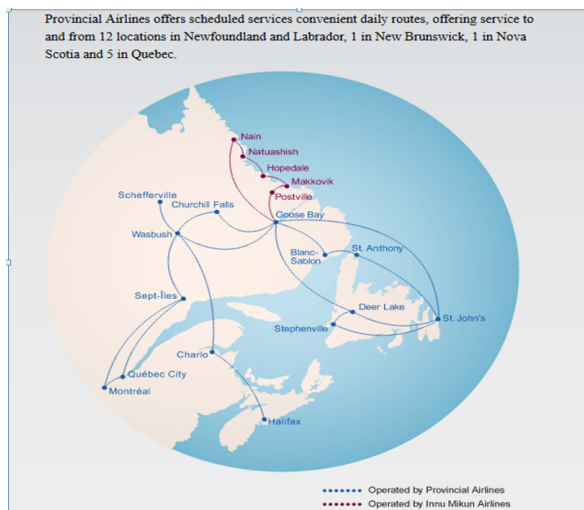
The route will start at Yarmouth, go through the Annapolis Valley, the Rawdon Hills, the Cobequids, to the ferry at Pictou, then on to Georgetown. Plans are being made for Georgetown Conference delegates to join Maher and Wedler for the last stage of their trek.

Maher and Wedler will maintain <http://r2gtrek.blogspot.ca/> allowing others to follow the route, view daily stories of interest and even support the trek.

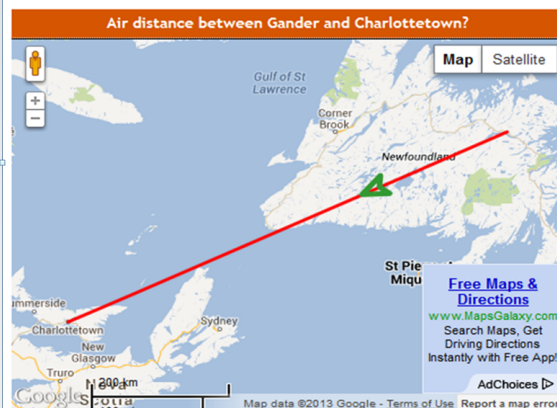
“Air Georgetown” for delegates from Newfoundland and Labrador

Atlantic Canada is a massive region of 208,000 square miles, of which Newfoundland and Labrador comprises 156,000 square miles. It is the most rural Atlantic Province. The cost of transportation is steep, within Newfoundland and Labrador, and to get to what Newfoundlanders refer to as ‘Upalong’. It is especially frustrating for people throughout Atlantic Canada that it costs more to fly within the region than it does to fly to national hubs such as Toronto. One is more likely to get a cheap airfare from Prince Edward Island to Phoenix than from PEI to Newfoundland. A round-trip airfare from St. John’s to PEI can cost upwards of \$1,000.

Because of the physical distance, the cost of regional transportation, and differing historical circumstances, Newfoundland has always been less ardent about collaborative efforts among the four provinces of Atlantic Canada than has been the case for the provinces of PEI, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, otherwise known as ‘The Maritimes’. Newspapers Atlantic, with its 70 member papers in the four provinces, including 15 papers in Newfoundland and Labrador, is one of the best examples that can be found of effective collaboration at the regional level. The following pair of maps demonstrates the significance of offering delegates from Newfoundland and Labrador the option of assembling at a centrally located airport, probably at Gander in Central Newfoundland, from where they would fly to PEI by charter aircraft. In addition to the practical and cost advantages of offering a single solution to delegates from Newfoundland and Labrador, there are substantial benefits in terms of building spirit among Georgetown Conference delegates. Newfoundlanders and Labradoreans are famous for their good nature, as demonstrated when the people of Gander (population 10,000) threw open their arms and their homes to 6,600 passengers on U.S.-bound flights that were grounded in Gander on Sept. 11, 2001.



706 Km - Flight distance between Gander and Charlottetown



The Georgetown organizing committee recognized from the outset that a key measure of success for the Conference would be to have a strong representation of speakers and delegates from Newfoundland and Labrador. Rural revitalization and the sustainability of rural communities have been existential issues for Newfoundland and Labrador from the time people established rocky ‘outport’ communities to exploit the abundant North Atlantic cod fishery and other resources going back more than 400 years. During the past 50 years, out-migration and various government policies aimed at ‘resettlement’ have ensured that the theme of ‘Redefining Rural’ is palpable and meaningful to Newfoundlanders and Labradoreans.

Conference organizers were able to secure sponsorship support for the charter option, and for travel by delegates to gather in Gander, including agreement by airport authorities to waive landing fees, thereby offering a super-attractive price of \$400. Moreover, the Conference is prepared to further underwrite the cost for delegates requiring financial assistance which approximately one-half of the delegates have indicated would be necessary to their attendance.

The challenge of independence [no gov't \$\$], without alienating government

From its earliest days, the Georgetown Conference was conceived on the basis that it had to be independent from government. This was essential for the Conference and its outcomes to be free from government or political agendas, and to be perceived to be so. Further, the organizers recognized that it would be impossible to select fairly from among the multitude of politicians who would be interested to take part in the Conference. Thus, the best solution was to have no politicians or candidates.

The countervailing point was an understanding among people in rural communities throughout Atlantic Canada that government and public policy are necessary to any go-forward solution, and will be especially so as we 'Redefine Rural'. As with all things 'political', a compromise was struck. It was agreed that local politicians, such as the Mayor of Georgetown, the Warden of Guysborough, N.S., or First Nations Chiefs could be delegates or speakers. Further, the Conference reached out to the most senior levels of the bureaucracy in the four provinces to encourage participation by selected officials with policy and central administrative leadership roles. While many people considered the 'keep politics out of it' position to be abnormal in a world where Conferences are often constructed around funding and 'greetings' from politicians, the overwhelming reaction, including from political leaders, was that the position was both refreshing and respected.

The decision to not seek or accept public money meant that the Georgetown Conference faced a primary challenge to secure sponsorship support from the private sector. It was determined that a minimum of \$100,000 in sponsorship funding would be required to cover the direct costs of the Conference and to support travel, accommodation, etc. by delegates requiring some degree of financial assistance. Without charitable status for tax purposes, the Conference was not in a position to approach philanthropic foundations. Newspapers Atlantic set the standard with a cash contribution of \$25,000, plus invaluable administrative and in-kind support, including the Conference web site, thus becoming the 'Presenting Sponsor'. Corporations and private individuals were approached and requested to become 'Gold Sponsors' [\$10,000] or 'Silver Sponsors' [\$5,000]. The response was overwhelmingly positive, especially given the increasing number of approaches to the private sector seeking financial support for community causes and events. By early July, three months prior to the Conference, sponsorship commitments were approaching \$200,000, or double the original target.

This generous response reflects an astute recognition on the part of the Atlantic Canadian business community that vital rural communities are integral to their own success, and to the overall sustainability of Atlantic Canada. These same motivations led Newspapers Atlantic to initiate the Georgetown Conference, and to step up as Presenting Sponsor. The upshot of this support means that the logistics of the Georgetown Conference will be well supported, including the ability to underwrite the costs of approximately 40% of delegates who require financial assistance to take part. *Further*, the Conference will finish with a "surplus" of \$100,000, thereby providing a nest egg for ongoing initiatives and the possibility of future conferences. This has two implications: (i) it means that the Georgetown Conference is assured of financial success, unlike the typical conference that operates in a state of fiscal anxiety until the very last minute;

and (ii) it *increases* the onus on the organizing committee, on Newspapers Atlantic and on all participants to ensure that there is a legacy going beyond the Conference.

The opportunity to leverage social, broadcast, and other print media

Conferences typically struggle to gain public notice or to engage interested communities beyond the immediate group of delegates. The mainstream media tend not to report on conferences, unless something sensational is said or a near-fight breaks out.

The Georgetown Conference started with an enormous advantage. The grassroots networks and community-connectedness of the 70 member papers of Newspapers Atlantic, plus the commitment of the papers to engage editorially and through content-coverage, ensured that people throughout Atlantic Canada would be substantively exposed to “Redefining Rural”. This translated into a compelling cast of speakers, co-chairs, moderators and other key actors. Newspapers Atlantic members were directly responsible for the initiatives and interest that became “The Road to Georgetown”.

The momentum sparked by Newspapers Atlantic churned up a high level of interest among prospective delegates, who responded enthusiastically to the signal that the Georgetown Conference was looking for 250 ‘doers and producers’. As people bid to be delegates by telling their individual stories, and the stories of their communities, the momentum grew. The Conference organizing committee established an early objective to appeal to younger delegates [‘under 35 year old’]. It was pleasantly surprising to discover that the Conference appealed naturally to young people who were taking initiatives in their communities.

By early July, it became apparent that at least one-third of committed delegates met the ‘under-35’ criterion. This produced its own energy, and called for an active multi-media platform to disseminate the ideas and high level of engagement of the key participants in the Conference. The delegate bios and “Why I’m going to Georgetown” essays were posted on the Conference web site and visible to all, building further momentum. The collective example of the “Road to Georgetown” community meetings, the “Georgetown Letters” and other grassroots initiatives contributed to an organic dialogue. Conference organizers were invited to participate in regional open-line radio shows and interviewed on drive-home shows and supper-hour TV news. ‘Mainstream’ daily newspapers wanted to get in on the action.

It became clear that the Conference website lacked sufficient dimensions to accommodate and disseminate the growing conversation. Newspapers Atlantic responded by developing a Twitter account and a Facebook page. Community cable networks throughout the four provinces made plans to broadcast the Conference, thereby reaching a much broader audience, many of whom might not qualify as ‘doers and producers’. CPAC, the national public affairs consortium of Canadian cable broadcasters, indicated a desire to broadcast Georgetown Conference highlights. The University of Prince Edward Island stepped up to offer a MOOC, or a Massive Open Online Course, featuring speakers and panelists complementary to the Georgetown Conference program as well as interviews with speakers and delegates at the Conference. The entire Conference will be video-streamed, thereby making both the Conference and the MOOC universally accessible to people interested in “Redefining Rural”.

This explosion of multi-media interest and multi-modal capability would not have been possible without the generative capacity of the newspapers and journalists of Newspapers Atlantic, with a combined distribution of 735,000. This in turn generated a need to both steer and stir the conversation, not to control but to shepherd it. In organizational terms, this task was taken on by

a Communications Committee of publishers and editors of member papers of Newspapers Atlantic. In technological terms, a search was launched for a flexible and agile platform to consolidate the variety of modes and moods of the Georgetown Conference dialogue. This was a satisfying position, to be searching, 100 days before a Conference that might have been considered risky at the time of its inception, for a vehicle to capitalize on an enthusiastic and rich multi-media dialogue. At the Symposium presentation in Phoenix, we will be able to provide a report on the experience of working with this multi-modal platform, and on the integral role of community newspapers in ensuring its vitality and effectiveness.

The need to continue the work of ‘redefining rural’, and create a legacy

With impressive indications that the Georgetown Conference will succeed in the conventional sense of delegate attendance and enthusiasm, plus widespread media coverage and public interest, the challenge turns to capitalizing on the momentum and substantive success of the Conference to ensure that it has a legacy. In other words, this initiative will only be truly successful if it is more than a conference.

When steps were taken to launch the “Road to Georgetown”, with the aim of maximizing the energy and building the dialogue in the lead-up to the Georgetown Conference, organizers were already conscious of the potential and the imperative to extend the effort well beyond the conference.

While thinking about the possibilities is still at an early stage, it is not too soon to start mapping out scenarios, and inviting feedback. It will be especially valuable to have the comments and experience of participants in the “Newspapers and Community Building Symposium,” co-sponsored by the Huck Boyd National Center for Community Media at Kansas State University, the U.S. National Newspaper Association and the NNA Foundation. Potential legacy pathways or scenarios include:

- (i) That Georgetown Conference participants would go home with a new sense of their own capabilities and mission, with newly created informal networks of ‘doers and producers’ acting in areas of similar interest, and with a full menu of ‘things to do’ in their home communities.
- (ii) That the Georgetown Conference will attract and enable the next generation of ‘doers and producers’ in rural communities throughout Atlantic Canada.
- (iii) That there would be further conferences, perhaps on a biennial basis, held in other provinces of Canada’s Atlantic region, to continue the work and press further with the discourse and practical applications of “Redefining Rural”.
- (iv) That, in the in-between years, there would be well-planned retreats of leading players, to plan the biennial conferences, to keep abreast of initiatives, and to press forward with the dialogue and action of “Redefining Rural”.
- (v) That the Georgetown Conference will continue building a brand of excellence and initiative for “Redefining Rural”, and a reputation for showing that it is possible to create a ‘community changing’ movement through the leadership and capacity of community newspapers.
- (vi) That the Georgetown model will be adopted by other regions and communities, in North America and beyond, while giving credit to Georgetown. The Conference Assistant is Munyal Zira, a recent University of Prince Edward Island graduate and aspiring doctor whose home community is in Nigeria. These are global issues.
- (vii) That the Conference will produce a template or a formative prescription for “Redefining Rural” while addressing the context and the major challenges of the 21st

century; our opening keynote speaker Zita Cobb has established as a founding principle of her Shorefast Foundation: “We believe that there is a future for rural communities and that future is built on innovation, resilience, optimism and the ability to adapt.”

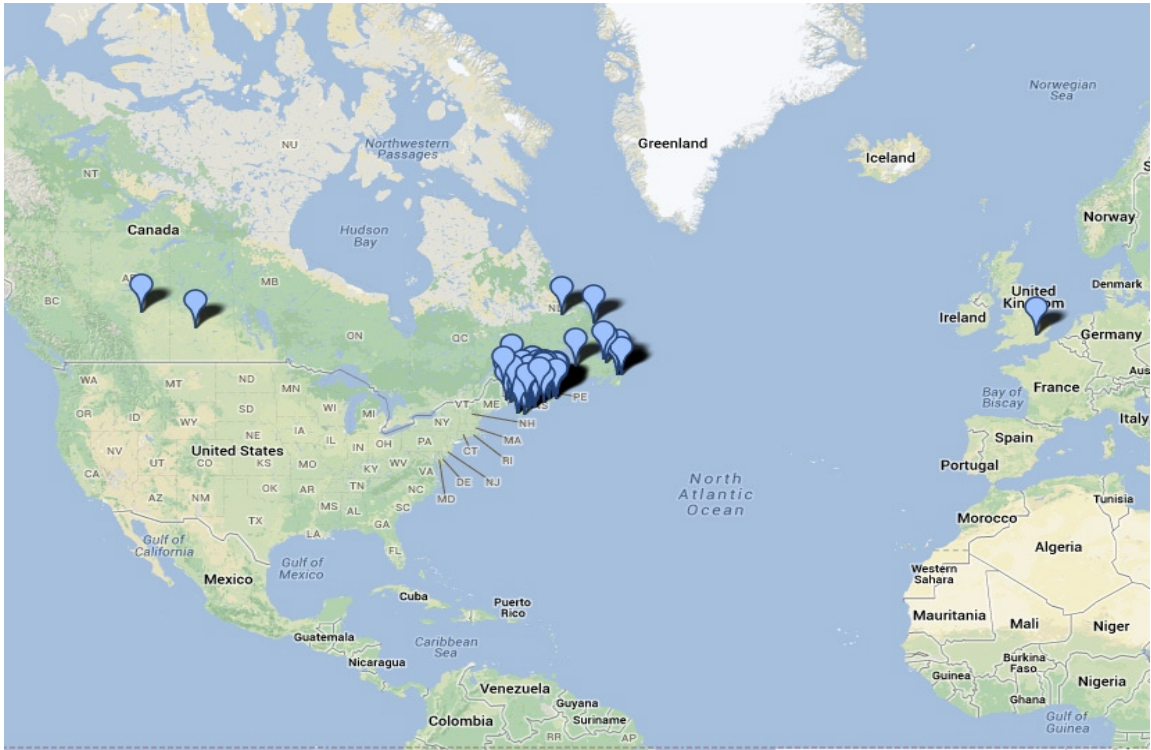
- (viii) That the template or formative prescription will provide inspiration for individuals and collaborative efforts in rural communities, small towns and regions throughout Atlantic Canada and well beyond, and that it will show practical policy direction to governments and communities.
- (ix) That Newspapers Atlantic and the member papers will gain new knowledge about community engagement, enhance their sense of leadership and collaboration, and demonstrate to their respective communities and the Atlantic region as a whole the powerful capabilities of community newspapers to engage people and communities, to show leadership, to collaborate with each other, and to reach an audience through substantive content, as well as through paid advertising and paid readership.

The most palpable legacy of the Georgetown Conference will be the relationships formed and the confidence established among 250 ‘doers and producers’ who came to Georgetown. Through them, the impact of the Conference will be continually renewed and indelible. The Google maps depicted in Appendices I and II show the origins of the delegates and speakers who comprise the history-making Georgetown Conference. We will have an updated, and even more fully populated, image to share at the “Newspapers and Community-Building Symposium” in Phoenix.

Conclusion

From its inception, the Georgetown Conference has been based on a belief, or a wager, that there are ‘doers and producers’ in rural communities throughout Atlantic Canada who are ready and eager to ‘Redefine Rural’. Through the grassroots networks and concerted efforts of community newspapers throughout Atlantic Canada, led by Newspapers Atlantic, we have been impressed at every turn by the experience, talent and enthusiasm of individuals and communities that have responded to this call to action. This has been a compelling demonstration of the power of community newspapers to instigate and lead change, and to be unique and integral partners in community-building.

Appendix I: Delegate Map



Appendix II: Speaker Map

