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**THE COASTERS ASSOCIATION AND COMMUNITY VITALITY
ON THE LOWER NORTH SHORE OF QUÉBEC...**

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THE COASTERS ASSOCIATION AND COMMUNITY VITALITY ON THE LOWER NORTH SHORE OF QUÉBEC...

Vital communities are characterized by strong, active and inclusive relationships between residents, private sector, public sector and civil society organizations that work to foster individual and collective wellbeing. Vital communities are those that are able to cultivate and marshal these relationships in order to create, adapt and thrive in a changing world and thus improve wellbeing of citizens.¹

The Coasters Association is a non-profit organization incorporated in 1998 in St. Augustine, Québec, by a group of concerned citizens with a mission and objectives to protect and further the interests of the population, and, to contribute to the vitality of the Lower North Shore of Québec. Comprised of less than five (5) thousand people, the Lower North Shore consists of fourteen (14) isolated communities, twelve predominantly English speaking, two Francophone, and two Innu located in five (5) regional Municipalities, which have been identified as a being devitalized and the second most vulnerable of 66 economic regions in Canada. The Coasters Association is the only regional organization on the Lower North Shore representing all communities on all issues, and voicing their concerns as one collective body.

A community's ability to take charge of its development is based on several types of resources (demographic, political, legal, social, economic and cultural), that are transformed for the benefit of the community through dynamic leadership.² The Coasters Association is lead by sixteen (16) elected board of directors, representing the five (5) regional municipalities, ensuring that it remains attuned to the specific needs of the Lower North Shore and its citizens.

In 2008, the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages produced a report titled "Vitality Indicators for Official Language Minority Communities 2: Three English-Speaking Communities in Quebec | English-Speaking community of the Lower North Shore". This study was carried out because official language minority communities across Canada (English-speaking in Quebec, French-speaking in other provinces) are increasingly mobilizing to maintain their "vitality." They face real challenges, which stem from their minority context and from demographic trends, to retain their young people, their schools, their employment base and their culture and identity.³ This study was conducted through consultations with community members who identified four sectors that were relevant to community vitality on the Lower North Shore, which included: **Youth; Health and Social Services; Community Renewal and Economic Development.**

The Coasters Association mandate is to work with all stakeholders, as well as to advocate for and act on behalf of the population of the Lower North Shore to advance the wellbeing and vitality of its citizens. In this regard, the Coasters Association updated and renewed its organizational strategic plan for the period of 2012-2017 to ensure that we:

- ***Renew and constantly revitalize the organization***
- ***Nurture and enhance community capacity and leadership on the Lower North Shore***
- ***Promote the social development of vulnerable groups on the Lower North Shore***
- ***Encourage the development, diversification and sustainability of the Lower North Shore economy***

1 Community Vitality, A report of the Canadian index of wellbeing, Katherine Scott, Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD), November 2010

2,3 Vitality Indicators for Official Language Minority Communities 2: Three English-Speaking Communities in Québec, The English-Speaking Community of Lower North Shore, June 2008

For over a quarter century, the Coasters Association has been front and center in addressing the challenges facing the population of the region by focusing on a range of community issues, especially the development of human and social capital which is required to renew leadership, develop new programs and undertake projects that spark innovation and bring about positive change. But, the Coasters Association cannot act alone, it has – and must – continue to work together with the many partners from all levels of government, institutions and the private sector that are essential to achieving progress for the entire region. Despite the remote and rugged nature of the region, there is potential in each member of every community to contribute to the enhancement of the vitality of their community, and the Coasters Association is there to make sure it happens.

The unique linguistic, socio-economic and geographical identity of citizens of the Lower North Shore defines the reality in which they live and work, and, is an integral measure of their determination to chart their own future in an ever-changing world. In September of 2017, Mr. David Johnson, the Québec representative of the Office of Commissioner of Official Languages visited the Lower North Shore to consult with members of the public, business and government on matters relevant to their continued vitality. One such consultation was in St. Paul's River on September 8, 2017, with individuals representing the: Coasters Association, Lower North Shore Bio-Products Coop, St. Paul's River Community Learning Center, Lower North Shore Housing Corporation, Municipality of Bonne-Espérance, Lower North Shore Tourism Ad hoc Table, St. Paul's Tourism Development Association, and the Eastern Lower North Shore Harbour Authority. The following priorities and objectives were identified by consultation participants as the most critical issues that need to be addressed to ensure the long-term viability of the Lower North Shore and its citizens:

Priorities...

- ***Social and educational development initiatives*** for vulnerable seniors, those with a loss of autonomy and youth who are disproportionately impacted and least able to respond to changing economic and social realities;
- ***Economic development*** to create employment opportunities and improve the well-being of the communities of the Lower North Shore;
- ***High-speed internet and a cellular communications network*** to ensure the long-term sustainability of communities, organizations and businesses;
- ***Access to and delivery of essential healthcare services*** on the Lower North Shore to support a healthy population.

Strategic orientations...

- ***Increase financial support for long-term social and educational programming, services and infrastructure*** to address the needs of seniors and those with a loss of autonomy who are socially isolated and in need of housing, as well as children and parents, who require programs and community infrastructure to ensure the healthy social integration and education of future generations;
- ***Support human resources by sustaining adequate numbers of qualified and trained staff*** to ensure the long-term success of organizations, as well as health and social programs;
- ***Promote and foster a vibrant industrial and business climate*** on the Lower North Shore by collaboration with social enterprise organizations, businesses, and government to meet the need for information, and access to critical programs and services to support their development; including, finding solutions to challenging regulatory rules regarding access to federal and provincial government programs and services, viable long-term funding, and appropriate funding ratios reflective and responsive of the

economic reality of the Lower North Shore, funding for human resources, training and travel, as well as, answers to the problem of an unreliable and expensive transportation network;

- **Create opportunities for vulnerable youth through innovation and excellence** by continuing to sustain the retention of post-secondary graduates through the integration of youth engagement in the bio-development, agriculture, aquaculture, and tourism industries on the Lower North Shore, by leading in research and development initiatives, enhancing structural development of regional economy through appropriate human resources for clusters and networks developed throughout the local economies, spearheading knowledge acquisition and innovation development, and increase opportunities for young entrepreneurs and youth business development;
- **Continue encouragement of innovative businesses initiatives under development**, such as Birch Sap Harvesting, Apiculture (Support Bee pollination initiatives), Horticulture, Aquaculture, and Wild Berry Development, as well as **working collaboratively with the established fishing and tourism industry** to identify challenges and opportunities to allow their businesses to diversify and prosper;
- **Implementation of high-speed internet and cellular communication infrastructure** to support and facilitate innovative economic development and ensure safe and reliable access to both critical and non-critical public and private services;
- **Advocate for the continued presence and enhancement of local healthcare delivery and access**, for citizens who are increasingly at risk, due to reduced Government funding and an ongoing reorganization of services on the Lower North Shore.

Major Accomplishments...

- Establishment of the **Lower North Shore Housing Corporation**;
- Completed business plan for the development of the **Lower North Shore Business Incubator Accelerator Center and Research Facility** in partnership with the Lower North Shore Bioproducts Solidarity Cooperative;
- Establishment of a **Masters Student Program** in collaboration with the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières;
- Partnership established with the First Nations Education Council to provide access to a **high-speed internet network**;
- The Coasters Association has developed an extensive and instrumental **network of knowledge and relationships with partners from all levels of government, institutions and the private sector** that can be used for the benefit of the population of the Lower North Shore.

Challenges...

- An **aging population** with significant housing, health and social needs, mental health care, and a continued **exodus of youth and adults** from the region to pursue educational and employment opportunities;
- **The Lower North Shore is struggling with access to basic services**, due in part to non-existent infrastructures, such as a connection to Route 138 and both cellular and high-speed internet, which, is exacerbated by an unreliable and high cost transportation network and a continued erosion and presence of local government services and funding.

The Coasters Association is committed to working in partnership with all local, regional, provincial and national stakeholders to ensure our attention is both sustained and focused on finding solutions to achieving a better quality of social and economic vitality for the citizens of the Lower North Shore. The interconnectedness of the challenges currently faced by the Lower North Shore is both an obstacle and opportunity, in that the compounding effect of a lack of a service, infrastructure or funding, leads to multiple complexities in everyday life, but, when one challenge is addressed and resolved, the benefits have a positive influence and generate actions that resolve others. Through this community consultation, and others before it, the challenges identified are recognized as being the most common for the entire Lower North Shore, and, the ones with the most detrimental effect on community vitality; fortunately, they also represent the greatest opportunity for positive change and enhanced quality of life. Therefore, the Coasters Association in collaboration with our partners are working together to continue to identify and refine priorities, and find solutions to address our most common challenges; to seek common solutions to benefit the majority of people. We are excited to be involved in making a difference in the lives of citizens today while building a bright and more promising future for the generations that follow.

Results of Consultation...

- *The Coasters Association will provide the Québec representative of the Office of Commissioner of Official Languages a **summary report of the September 8, 2017 consultation**;*
- *The Québec representative of the Office of Commissioner of Official Languages will recommend the Commissioner of Official Languages request **a meeting with the Auditor General of Canada**.*