

## **Bell Island's population decline slowed:**

(Contributed by Ed Kent- March 2007)

The 2006 Census counts have just been released by Statistics Canada. Not unlike most rural Newfoundland and Labrador communities, low birth rates and mainland job opportunities are resulting in lower population counts. We are pleased to learn that Bell Island's population decline has "slowed" from an annual 3% drop to an annual drop of less than 2%.

These are initial population estimates, which based on past history, are usually 3% higher when the final counts are completed. The tentative numbers show Bell Island with 2,784 people in 2006, which will likely show 2,850 when the final count is tabulated. This compares with 3,078 listed as the 2001 Census Population.

Bell Island is experiencing an average loss of 50 people per year (or 1.6 % a year or 8% cumulative over the past 5 years). In the previous 5-year period (1996 to 2001) Bell Island lost close to 3% per year or 90 people annually.

The loss can be attributed to:

- Births are down to an average of 25 a year while deaths are approximately 50 per year for a net loss of 25 every year
- Over 65 % of graduating high school students, once they complete their post secondary education, are moving to the mainland to take advantage of work opportunities for a loss of 20-30 per year
- Other population changes are negligible with a few families moving out and some retired people moving back home

The significant improvement reflected in a lower population loss number can be attributed to the affordable and improved ferry service, which is allowing increased numbers to commute daily by ferry to mainland jobs. Over 550 Bell Islanders now use the service each year to commute to work in the City region and another 500 work on the Island. Increased tourism is providing more tourism related employment opportunities, as is the fish plant. Bell Islanders filing tax returns reported over \$38,000,000 in yearly income in 2004

The numbers dependent on Government income support are dropping. Regrettably, however, there remains over 35% of the population dependent on Government support as their main source of income. (This tragically is the highest welfare dependency rate in our Province.)

With continuing investments in the ferry service and affordable rates Bell Island's population in the years ahead should experience a gradual decline only and assuming a continued good ferry service Bell Island should expect to have a population of around 2000 people in the Year 2025.