**A look back at the tragedy:**

**Recovering, moving forward and**

**building back better**

*Address by Colette Roy Laroche, mayor of Lac-Mégantic, at the Conference of the Canadian Federation of University Women on Friday, June 19, 2015*

Good morning,

I’d like to start by thanking Ms. Koninck, President of the Quebec Chapter of the Canadian Federation of University Women, for giving me this opportunity to bring you the latest news from our community and share with you my personal experience and that of my constituents following the July 6, 2013 tragedy in Lac-Mégantic.

I am happy and honored to be with you today, but at the same time a little nervous about finding myself in front of an audience filled with so many highly educated women with such impressive track records.

Before telling you about my personal experience, I’d like to give you some background about our community. Lac-Mégantic is a small town of 6,000 residents and since the summer of 2013, it has had to face a tremendous challenge. It’s the type of challenge that no city – big or small – is ever really prepared to face.

Let me just take a moment to go back to the event itself. In the early hours of July 6, 2013, a train hauling 72 tankers of crude oil charged at breakneck speed towards the centre of town. It derailed when it hit a sharp curve, causing a series of explosions.

Within minutes, the oil had burst into a fireball, destroying half of the buildings in the historic downtown core and leaving 47 people dead. The victims were trapped by the flames and didn’t stand a chance. In a small community like ours, losing 47 people means that practically everyone had lost a loved one, friend or acquaintance.

About 6 million litres of petroleum crude oil were spilled, making the Lac-Mégantic tragedy the largest land oil spill in North America’s history.

Some of the crude oil burned, some seeped underground, making its way to the other end of the downtown core, and some reached the buildings that had not been destroyed by the fire.

In the end, we had to level almost all our downtown core due to the contamination and the risk of future contamination.

You can well imagine that this tragedy is a human, social and environmental catastrophe with repercussions that will be felt by our community for a very, very long time.

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It was a tremendous shock for all of us, and a tragedy that touched people from Quebec, Canada and around the world. The outpouring of goodwill that followed was a source of comfort and encouragement for us. I still feel it wherever I go and am extremely grateful for it.

I was invited here today to talk to you about the human, social and political side of the Lac-Mégantic tragedy from my point of view as a woman. I’ve been held up as a symbol of what women can accomplish in difficult times. It’s hard for me to explain exactly how I managed to have the courage to face my responsibilities. I don’t think you can explain it; you just do what needs to be done.

It’s been almost two years already. It’s still too soon for me to draw any conclusions or lessons from the tragedy. We are still wrapped up in helping and supporting the bereaved and displaced, managing the decontamination, planning the reconstruction work and grappling with complex funding issues and needs.

And remember that we also need to continue providing citizens with regular municipal services, like roadwork, environment, leisure, economic development and so on. In other words, we need to keep doing our job as a city.

To describe my experience, I’d like to focus on three factors that have been important in our situation: communication, community resilience and citizen participation. I’ll discuss the issue of communication and resilience from both a personal and social perspective and citizen participation as an instrument of reconstruction and a tool for the development of community resilience.

**Communication**

Let me start by admitting that I’ve always seen myself as having limited communication skills. In public, I am shy and, as a result, I usually prefer to listen. So for me, communication means listening to others more than anything else.

On the morning of July 6, 2013, it was clear that we had to inform our residents and the population as a whole as to what had just happened. I knew we needed to hold a press conference, and I also knew that, as the mayor, it was my responsibility to do so.

But what do you say to a community in shock? The downtown core was burning. Some 2,000 of our 6,000 residents had been evacuated.

What could I say to my fellow citizens who, just like me, knew without a doubt that many of our own had probably just lost their life? Did my daughter, son, sister or brother perish in the blaze? What could I say to these people in the face of such fear and uncertainty? What message could I deliver?

As mayor of the town, I needed to say something that would have meaning, something appropriate to the situation. But how could I when, as a citizen, I felt just as devastated as the rest of the community?

Before the cameras started rolling, I managed to look deep within and reconnect with my values and the inner strength I knew I had when facing hardship and adversity.

My first reflex was to identify with the people and try to put myself in their shoes. A thought came to me: What would *I* want to hear from my mayor after such a dreadful event?

It became clear that what I needed to do was to give them accurate information: what we did and did not yet know; what actions were being taken to control the damage; and what measures were implemented to help those displaced from their homes.

My goal was to provide information that was transparent, without being alarmist. I wanted to offer objective details without dramatic undertone. I wanted to reassure my fellow citizens by letting them know that the various city departments, ministries and Red Cross were all working together to help those in need, that everything was being done to ensure safety and relief and that we were in control of the situation.

But on that day at around 7 am, when those cameras started rolling, my own feelings as a citizen of this town overshadowed my intention to deliver that initial message. I had a lump in my throat, but I willed myself to go on, no matter how hard it was. At first, I couldn’t get the words out, but then I felt a warm hand on my shoulder and heard a few words of encouragement. That’s what gave me the strength and courage to continue.

After that, every day, twice a day at 10 am and 2 pm, I faced the media, accompanied by people from public and civil security, the ministry of the environment and other stakeholders, as needed. We kept this up for at least six weeks. Then, press conferences went down to once a day and eventually to once week for the next year.

In the wake of all this media attention, I did have the support of the City of Quebec communication department, but it was still me who had to face the cameras at each press conference. As the days went on, people’s questions became more pressing. Anger, incomprehension and impatience arose.

How did I manage to hold on, day after day, month after month? To be honest, I still don’t know exactly, but I do have a few thoughts.

First I decided from the very beginning that I would stay true to myself, my personality and my values. I didn’t want to take on a persona. I wanted to play my role as mayor, just as I am, with my strengths and weaknesses. I wanted my constituents to recognize their mayor and see her as she had always been before the tragedy.

My first concern was to make sure everything was being done to meet people’s needs, including bereaved families and displaced people. With services being offered by the municipality, health and social services, the Red Cross and other levels of government, good communication and coordination were crucial.

In hindsight, I now realize that communication and information are important factors when it comes to crisis management. My experience has taught me that communication is one of the cornerstones of resilience.

*“The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn’t said.” Peter Drucker*

**Resilience**

The second factor I’d like to discuss is resilience. It’s a term that became popular after 9/11. I probably could have used the word to describe my personal and professional experience in the past, but to be honest it wasn’t part of my vocabulary.

After the Lac-Mégantic catastrophe, the word “resilience” started to appear in many media reports and speeches to describe the attitude of the residents of Lac-Mégantic.

In my opinion, this resilience is both individual and collective.

I personally discovered that I was capable of much more than I ever believed. I am often asked the same questions: How were you able to handle the stress so well? How did you manage to overcome such an unfathomable disaster?

I believe it is a reflection of my attitude towards life in general. In the face of adversity and disaster, my approach has always been to confront the problem head on. It’s a state of mind and a source of emotional strength we can draw on when catastrophe strikes.

I don’t think resilience develops overnight, in a week or even in a year. Resilience is a lifelong journey. It is a steady, dynamic process that happens over time. It is our ability to recover from a setback.

*“Resilience is the art of navigating through the storm and torrents.” Boris Cyrulnik*

I was also fortunate to receive a great deal of social support from municipal officials, governments, many public and private organizations and the population at large – support that is still present today.

From the very first moment, I decided I would sow the seeds of hope. I asked the community to look ahead. I boldly invited people to get moving and take action.

This leads me to community resilience. The show of solidarity that came from other municipalities, from Quebec as a whole and beyond certainly made a major contribution to this community resilience. It helped us heal, and healing is an essential step in the process of rebuilding. It starts with the repair of people’s hearts, followed by the reconstruction of our city and, through it all, the restoration of our collective pride.

“*To make it, you need both inner resources and a helping hand.”*

I’m not an expert on resilience, but I’d like to share with you a few of the actions we have taken, and continue to take, to help our community recover. These actions no doubt contribute to our strong sense of resilience as a community.

In the weeks following the tragedy, it became apparent to us that the best way to grieve and to take a positive step forward was to begin planning the reconstruction and development of new public spaces. For us, it was a way to restore hope and start looking ahead.

It seemed to us, however, that the traditional approach to management and planning needed to be revisited.

Under normal circumstances, the city administration would have worked with its employees and consultants on developing a plan. We would have submitted this plan to the general public, which would have given us feedback during a public consultation. We then would have made the necessary adjustments and taken action…for better or for worse.

This time, we decided to take a different road. This road may seem longer, riskier, but in the end it will save us time and, more importantly, it will lead to greater social harmony and better social acceptability.

We decided to start from the dreams and ideas of citizens to develop a reconstruction plan. The plan was to reflect their wishes and aspirations.

**Citizen Participation**

We chose citizen participation – rather than public or civic consultations – as our modus operandi. It’s an important nuance.

The public consultation process in Quebec municipal politics is a well-oiled machine. Draft regulations are submitted to citizens for comments and elected officials then adopt them, with or without modifications.

But citizen participation is the step before public consultation. It involves defining the very projects that will become regulations.

In Lac-Mégantic, our approach was to get the citizens themselves to develop the reconstruction project from scratch. We started by asking them to share with us their dreams and aspirations for their perfect town.

We then addressed some pragmatic issues, such as land planning, building architecture and the projects that needed to be initiated first based on the most pressing needs in our community. It is the collection of these ideas, projects and plans that will determine our new public spaces.

Our citizen participation process themed “Reinventing our Town,” was launched at the start of 2014, a few months after the tragedy.

The theme is an ambitious and powerful one. It reflects our willingness to use the rebuilding process as an opportunity to question ourselves on our community values, ways of doing things, collective decisions and development prospects.

It’s not only a question of getting back on our feet, but of coming out of this ordeal stronger and making our town better than ever before. We were given an opportunity – a very sad one, of course, but an opportunity nonetheless – to improve our quality of life.

And to us, this is the true meaning of resilience: bouncing back, but also going further ahead and, in fact, further than ever before.

*“I can’t change the direction of the wind, but I can adjust my sails to always reach my destination.” Jimmy Dean*

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As part of our citizen participation process, we have held about fifteen public meetings within a year: information sessions, community workshops, sector-based summits and, finally, States-General in the spring.

Citizens also participated in theme-based working groups, attending close to a dozen meetings to reflect and exchange on the issues at hand.

This is asking a great deal of a community still absorbing the shock of a catastrophe. And yet, every time, dozens or hundreds of people came out. They dedicated days and evenings to the project, sometimes even parts of their weekend.

We began to understand how this demanding exercise, which may even seem unreasonable, was actually an essential element on the road to healing. We felt the need to be with one another and the public forums met that need. The goal of the exercise was to develop a reconstruction plan, but in fact, the process itself ended up being as important as the end result.

It’s true for the community at large, but resilience begins with each individual citizen. A community cannot be resilient if its members do not have access to the conditions they need to live through all the stages of grief, regain their sense of hope and find the strength to bounce back.

The citizen participation process is obviously not the only way to reach that goal.

For example, psycho-social workers were actively involved immediately after the event, and almost two years later, their support remains essential. Lately, we have witnessed a rise in demand for support services from citizens still experiencing distress. Grieving is far from being a linear, perfectly predictable process.

Another way for citizens to speak out was by getting involved in railway safety and taking part in the oversight committee established at the request of citizens and supported by the Town of Lac-Mégantic.

We have noted that whether it’s citizen participation, psycho-social support or civic involvement in railway safety, these activities all create the necessary conditions for the emergence of what can certainly be called “community resilience.”

Having opportunities to come together makes a difference. After all, humans are social beings, which means that even in the most dramatic circumstances, they will use their connection with one another to thrive. This gives rise to a newfound sense of social solidarity that can help people shift their focus from individual needs to collective purpose. As a group, consideration for others and the needs of the community begins to take precedence.

At the same time, new bonds have been forged and a new generation of young leaders has emerged, ready to breathe new life into our community.

Citizen participation carried out in an organized, open and sincere manner is a strong motivating factor, which subsequently leads to a greater sense of individual responsibility. In Lac-Mégantic, we have noted that empowered, mobilized citizens are the first to get involved in building back our town and to get us to revisit our procedures and ways of doing things.

I am not saying that we now live in an ideal world where perfect harmony reigns and unanimity prevails? Of course not! It’s not what we even want.

What we want is to build the kind of consensus that will help us live together better and empower the people of Lac-Mégantic to face the many challenges that lie ahead. In a few years, we will be able to see just how resilient we really are.

In conclusion, I’ll just say that while tragic, this catastrophe has given me – and us all – an opportunity to learn more about ourselves as individuals and as a community.

Thank you for your attention.

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