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**From:** Terry Penny [REDACTED]  
**Sent:** March 4, 2024 12:43 PM  
**To:** Office of the Legislative Counsel  
**Subject:** Handout for Act 407  
**Attachments:** What-We-Heard-Report.pdf

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As the length of the attachment was too lengthy to copy and distribute, I ask that it please be distributed to all committee members.

It supports arguments for my presentation today.

Thank you. Terry Penny

<https://antigonish.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/What-We-Heard-Report.pdf>

Sent from my iPhone

(A)

Good afternoon. Thank you Mr Chairman for the opportunity to present here today. As a lifelong resident of both the Town and County of Antigonish I am here to continue to ask that my voice be heard.

**Initially I ask, as the matter continues before the Court of Appeal, that this Bill be deferred until Court processes are complete.**

Continuing,

After the vote to explore consolidation Community Engagement Sessions began. On October 11, 2022 in a CBC Mainstreet interview the Mayor stated that the purpose of the 17 engagement sessions was to find out "if there was something we were missing". When asked about total attendance at these sessions, the Mayor responded "a conservative estimate would be about 1200 people". When pressed as to how this number represented the voting population, her response was "that would be about 6%". Admitting this was not a very high number, the Mayor concluded "I see that as **people agreeing with what we said or not being engaged**".

(please note this number includes all feedback including calls + emails. Actual Attender at mtg was 504)

There is significant evidence to contradict her conclusion. In addition to the 900 people attending 11 grassroots town hall meetings, there are 4200 names on a petition representing 25% of the voting population, there are two significant polls with greater than 75% wanting a vote and we have the very words of Justice Gabriel "that although they were unsuccessful in their Application, their views were shared by a portion of the affected population, and apparently not a trivial portion, either."

Collectively, these facts make it clear the Mayor's conclusion was unfounded and erroneous. People are engaged and they are not in agreement.

There have been two votes by Council and two polls conducted by the people. It is noted that Council support for consolidation is at best a minimal majority, decided by only one vote by both councils. On the contrary both polls shows overwhelming support for a vote.

Faults with the process were seemingly recognized by the Mayor when, in an October 31, 2022 CBC interview, she was asked about the process used and the community objection to that process. The Mayor stated "Yeah, so we did discuss this and both councils agreed on the process that was chosen. Of course, if I could go back and change things, I'm sure the Warden and I would do that".

Some suggest that residents responded emotionally, as noted in a testimonial by a former town employee. Described as "the drama that unfolded" it continues, stating the "decision (of consolidation) was always going to be highly emotional and controversial".

When voices are not heard, acknowledged for the truth of their messages and then twisted into a position of opposition of content rather than of process, emotions can run

high. I would suggest that many communities in this province, indeed this country would like to have their residents as engaged in their community as the residents of Antigonish have demonstrated in their effort to be part of this decision.

OP-EDs in favour of consolidation were written by several councillors as well as a joint opinion piece by a former mayor and warden, introduced by Minister Lohr on the 2nd reading of the Bill. While providing opinion, none of these provided any evidence of studies describing the risks and rewards of consolidation.

The residents of Antigonish have not felt heard. The 2024 poll reports only 22% felt they had received sufficient information. The *What We Heard Report*, the engagement summary report states "In general, we heard that there was an underlying lack of confidence in the overall process, the municipal leaders and the relationship between the Town and County". With this decided lack of confidence **I ask that** a study and plebiscite be included before any merger is considered.

It is never too late to change things. **I ask** you listen again to the October 31, 2022 words of the Mayor, "if I could go back and change things, I'm sure the Warden and I would do that." Do not accept that the engagement sessions attended by 6% of the population provide sufficient evidence of support for the process.

Additionally, please consider the following amendments.

**Section 6 (1)**

As stated, the *What We Heard Report* describes the residents as having an "underlying lack of confidence in the overall process, the municipal leaders and the relationship between the Town and County". With this lack of confidence and trust in present municipal leaders, **I ask** for a delay in the appointment of transition team members until after a municipal election is held, allowing residents of Antigonish to elect a Council they have confidence in. Supported by the people, this elected council could move forward with the transition to one consolidated municipality.

It is a conflict of interest to have individuals involved in the design of a new governance structure and then put their name forward for a position in that structure. If the transition team is implemented before the municipal election, **I ask** that persons on the transition team not be allowed to offer their names as candidates in the October 2024 Municipal Election. It has already been publicly announced that a transition team member is seeking the position of Mayor.

**Section 6 (3)** With both Town and County Councils demonstrating a propensity to vote as a block on the consolidation issue, **I ask** that members of the Transition team not be permitted to participate in the nominations and election of alternate members.

**Section 7 (1)** The MGA does not outline many procedures for meetings. I ask for the inclusion that all Transition Team meeting schedules require public posting, be open to the public and that minutes of all meetings be recorded and posted in a timely manner.

**Section 12 (1)** The limitations of time should not remove the participation of residents in the NSUARB process of municipal boundaries determination. I ask this committee to ensure that boundary recommendations be subject to the usual practice of public review. With a heightened interest in the 2024 municipal election, the districts have a profound effect on prospective councillors. To allow for a thoughtful consideration of candidacy, there is an immediacy to the designation of districts. I ask this committee to consider a timely date for completion of UARB recommendations

**Section 12 (2) & (3)**

Original consolidation presentations were for Regionalization with an elected mayor. All engagement sessions spoke to this being fact. Regionalization was thwarted by the financial implication of RCMP funding formulas. With the confirmation that Regionalization would change existing RCMP Service contracts, resulting in an additional \$1,000,000.00 cost, a decision was made that the model of regionalization would change to the present proposal. It was emphasized that all other parameters of the proposed Regionalization would remain the same, including the election of councillors by the ward system and the election of mayor by a vote of the people.

Returning to the previous argument that a conflict of interest exists when a declared candidate for the mayoral position serves on the very transition team that will be vested with the responsibility of determining the method of election of said position, I ask for it to be stated in the Act that the position of Mayor will be an elected position and not one to be determined by the Transition Committee.

**In conclusion**, I want to stress to this Committee that I am not opposed to consolidation. In a spring 2022 interview with The Halifax Herald, I was very clear that I had no position on consolidation because there was very limited information available on the rewards and risks of such a change in governance structure. I stand by that position today.

I believe that any decision on consolidation can only be made after a thorough study of the risks and benefits are conducted. Consolidation will impact us today and into the future. This should not and cannot be a decision of Councils alone. The voice of the people, my voice, needs to be heard either through a plebiscite or as a platform issue in the October 2024 municipal election.

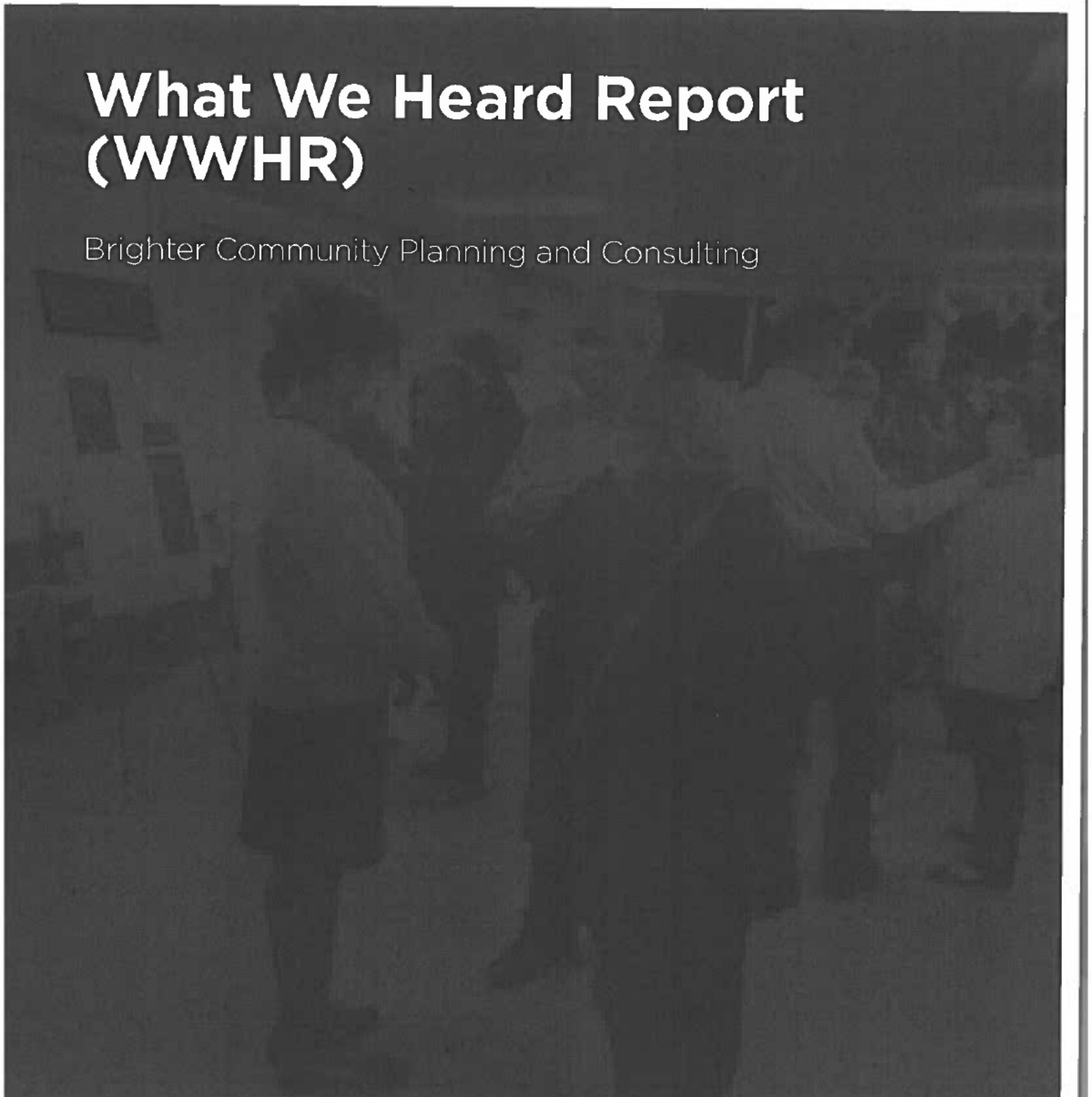
**Respectfully I ask again that Bill No.407: Antigonish Consolidation Act be delayed until the Court process has concluded, and failing that, that a study and a plebiscite, alone or in conjunction with the 2024 Municipal election, be incorporated into the Act and that the provisions of the Act not be implemented until such time that such a study and plebiscite occur.**

# ANTIGONISH

Our Community

## **What We Heard Report (WWHR)**

Brighter Community Planning and Consulting



This report was prepared by Brighter Community Planning & Consulting, PR Hive and Brian Smith. The efforts to ensure broad based input from stakeholders was the result of a dedicated hardworking team at the Town and County of Antigonish. Particular thanks is offered to Shirlyn Donovan and Kate Gorman who led the work of organizing the information sessions, and all the other engagement activities.

We would also like to acknowledge the dedication of Mayor Laurie Boucher and Warden Owen McCarron who attended every community information session and webinar. In addition, Councillors from both the County and the Town were a vital part of this process as they took the time to attend the information sessions to speak with residents from across Antigonish and listen to their comments.

The biggest thanks goes to the many people who provided their time and energy to share their input and thoughts throughout the consultation process. We greatly appreciate your participation in the consultation. We thank you.



This report was prepared by: Brighter Community Planning & Consulting and BTS Management Consulting



I want people to have conversations, to have controversy because it creates dialogue and builds bridges.

Haaz Sleiman

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# SECTION 1:

Between March and June 2022, the Town and County of Antigonish conducted a comprehensive community engagement process to get feedback on the following question:



*Would residents, businesses and the overall community be better served if the Town and County became one municipal unit?*

This engagement process started when both Councils passed a unanimous motion in September of 2021 to explore merging the two municipalities into one. Both Councils wanted to hear the thoughts, opinions, and concerns from those in the community before making a final decision on whether or not to consolidate. Together, they set out to listen and learn. This report summarizes what was heard.

The engagement consisted of the following:

- Community information sessions;
- Online engagement forum (i.e. HowSpace);
- Workshops & sessions with business groups and non-profits;
- Webinars;
- Frequently Asked Questions, which were posted on a central website, [antigonish.ca](http://antigonish.ca);
- A dedicated email and phone line; and
- Mail-Outs, which included a letter to all residents, and a 16 page insert in the County Connect newsletter.

As the first in-person engagement sessions were held, we heard a mix of opinions on the format and that some people wanted more time to ask questions as a group and consider the pros and cons of consolidation. In response, we changed the in-person format to include a Question and Answer style session in small group discussions for those who liked this format. We also added more online sessions that gave residents the opportunity to hear a presentation and then submit questions to be answered live through an online chat box.



From the entire engagement process, six key themes emerged:



### IDENTIFYING THE OPPORTUNITIES & RISKS

Taking the time to identify opportunities and risks for each individual municipal unit became clear when participants asked, "what are the pros and cons?" Some saw risks associated with merging, while others saw the potential benefits and opportunities.



### CHANGES TO SERVICE DELIVERY

This includes fire departments, policing, recreation, water and electrical utilities as well as planning, roads and infrastructure. Comments were mostly around identifying potential impacts on and opportunities for these services.



### COMMUNITY IDENTITY

There are many distinct geographic and cultural communities within Antigonish. Comments were about protecting these identities and reducing any negative impacts on the local communities.



### TAXATION

There were concerns about possible impacts on residential and commercial tax rates.



### ADMINISTRATION AND LEGAL

This theme included questions on the potential impact to staffing at each municipal unit and determining how the general administration of a new municipal unit would run.



### PUBLIC CONFIDENCE

In general, we heard that there was an underlying lack of confidence in the overall process, the municipal leaders and the relationship between the Town and County.

Another reoccurring topic of discussion was the way Councils will make their decision on consolidation. Some participants expressed a strong desire for a plebiscite before Councils consider the question of potential consolidation. Others thought Councils were elected to make decisions like this and that the vote on consolidation should remain with Council and not involve a plebiscite.

## SECTION 2:

The Town and County of Antigonish are two separate municipal units. Over the years the Town and County have established a positive working relationship at both the Council and staff level. That working relationship has brought both municipal units to this point in time where they are considering becoming one. In September of 2021, all members of both Councils unanimously voted to explore all aspects of what it would mean to consolidate. Although there are many financial and administrative considerations that go into the overall exploration process, it was important to both Councils that the public, local businesses, community groups, and other stakeholders were engaged so they could understand their specific concerns, opportunities or questions regarding a potential merger. The Councils hired Brighter Community Planning to support a comprehensive engagement program to answer one key question:



*Would residents, businesses and the overall community be better served if the Town and county became one municipal unit?*

This **What We Heard Report (WWHR)** is a summary of the input received from the residents and other stakeholders between March and June 2022. Our role was not to measure the support for or against consolidation. **Our role was to engage the community in discussions on a potential consolidation, gather that feedback, and present the themes to Councils and the greater community.** As a result, this report is a synthesis and reflection of what we heard from participants. The WWHR summarizes the main "themes" from the engagement process.

Councils will use this input, along with the other important factors, before making a decision on whether or not to proceed with consolidation. Each Council requires a majority vote in favour of consolidation, independent of each other, in order to move forward.

We collected input from stakeholders in a number of ways, in-person, online and over the phone. More than 1,000 separate interactions occurred where people provided their thoughts, questions, and ideas. People were invited to attend community sessions, attend workshops, send emails, post comments online, speak directly to their Councillor or call the community phone lines. Every civic mailing address also received a copy of the County Connect newsletter in April 2022 with a colourful section on the main issues and how to participate in the community engagement.

## Why consider consolidation at all?

A question we often heard was why should the Town and County consider merging, especially when there are so many other pressing and critical issues prevalent in our society? The world is becoming more complex and often local governments must work together to deal with this complexity. This quote summarizes the increasing pressures felt by local government well:

*Some form of regional structure is needed to address regional problems such as fiscal disparities among municipalities and externalities in service provision. A regional structure is also needed to resolve transportation and environmental coordination issues and to ensure the economic competitiveness, social cohesion, and fiscal viability of city-regions in a global economic setting. Few problems and processes stop at municipal boundaries and many solutions require access to a larger pool of resources, both human and financial, than is likely to be at the disposal of small local governments. Some form of regional structure seems necessary if cities are to take full advantage of new and emerging opportunities for economic cooperation and for enhancing productivity and competitiveness in an increasingly knowledge-based economy. (Bird, 2013)*

However, some academic literature and a portion of the local community in Antigonish are unsure or unconvinced that merging is a good thing at this point in time.

*The complexity of municipal restructuring allows no easy answer as to whether consolidation will lead to effectiveness and efficiency improvements in service delivery or municipal governance. Ultimately, the success of consolidation in achieving greater efficiency and effectiveness will depend on the specific circumstances of the municipalities considering reform. (Vojnovic, Municipal Consolidation in the 1990s: an analysis of British Columbia, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia, 2008)*

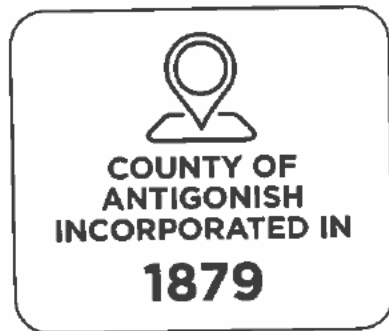


THE COUNTY OF ANTIGONISH WAS CREATED BY THE COUNTY INCORPORATION ACT OF 1879, WHICH MADE THE INCORPORATION OF COUNTIES COMPULSORY SO THEY COULD TAX THEMSELVES TO MAINTAIN ROADS AND BRIDGES. THE TOWNS WERE ENABLED THROUGH THE TOWNS INCORPORATION ACT OF NS IN 1888 TO ALLOW FOR THE COLLECTING OF MONEY FOR A LARGER VARIETY OF SERVICES THAN IN THE COUNTY, INCLUDING SEWERS, TOWN COURTS, POLICE ETC.

*(Fergusson, 1961)*

History can help us understand how the current municipal structure came to be and whether the current structure is useful today.

Both municipalities have existed for well over 100 years, with the County of Antigonish incorporated in 1879 and the Town incorporated in 1889.



The combined population of the Town and County in 1889 was 20,000, essentially the same as it is today. Both were created by provincial legislation to meet the evolving needs of the region in the late 19th century. The legislation created a local level of government to deal with local issues. At that time, people lived their entire lives in a much smaller geographical area than we do today, and the local government structure and service delivery reflected this.



Today, the world we live in is much more complex and the expectations placed on municipal government have changed significantly. In the municipal context, this complexity can be both expected and surprising. The most recent example is the COVID-19 pandemic and helping communities rebound economically and socially after an incredibly challenging two years. Municipalities today must also manage government regulations for infrastructure that come with significant legal liability, find solutions to a significant shortage of affordable housing, to address the impacts of climate change, to recruit and retain employees, and to manage financial resources. Municipalities are also facing modern issues around equity, diversity and inclusion, environmental health, accessibility, racism, and rural internet access while maintaining democratic processes during a pandemic. Both the Town and County are grappling with how to manage these complexities.

Like many other municipalities across Nova Scotia and Canada, Town and County Councils are investigating the idea that one municipal unit might be better to respond to existing and emerging complexities. (Vojnovic & Poel, Provincial and Municipal Restructuring in Canada: Assessing Expectations and Outcomes, 2000) History has also shown us that the Province of Nova Scotia is supportive when municipalities wish to consider a potential merger by providing funding and advice, or by creating special legislation to allow consolidation to occur.

Both Town and County Councils will need to independently decide if they want to consolidate. To make this decision, there are many factors that Councils must consider. This document is focused on just one of these factors – the input of the public. Other factors, such as budget or future opportunities, are not part of our work or this report, but information on these topics will be provided to Councils by other subject matter experts as part of the decision-making process.



## HISTORY OF MUNICIPAL MERGERS IN NOVA SCOTIA

- Cape Breton  
Regional Municipality  
**August 1, 1995**
- Halifax Regional Municipality  
**April 1, 1996**
- Queens Regional Municipality  
**April 1, 1996**
- Canso & District  
of Guysborough  
**July 1, 2012**
- Bridgetown &  
County of Annapolis  
**APRIL 1, 2015**
- Springhill & County  
of Cumberland  
**April 1, 2015**
- Hantsport & District  
of West Hants  
**July 1, 2015**
- Parrsboro & County  
of Cumberland  
**November 1, 2016**
- Windsor & District  
of West Hants  
**April 1, 2020**

## How this document is set up?

This document is divided into sections to make it easier to read.

**SECTION 2** explains the approach and other information that will help you understand what activities occurred during the engagement and why.

**SECTION 3** summarizes all feedback into themes. We use the words of participants (“first voice”) to illustrate a particular perspective or point of view, although we may have corrected a spelling error to make the quote easier to read. In some cases, for example in a question-and-answer session where verbatim notes were not taken, a summary of comments are provided instead.

**SECTION 4** is a listing of What We Did with the feedback that we received. Throughout the engagement process, the Engagement Team had requests for changes or additional information. This section includes statements we heard throughout the process, and some that needed clarification when misinformation was circulating.

**SECTION 5** provides conclusions from the engagement process for Councils and the public to consider.

Throughout the document we have included inset boxes with information that may be helpful for you to better understand the perspective of the speaker or the issue. This information is not intended to sway or convince you of any particular point of view, but simply to provide facts.

Within this report, you will also see reference to the “Engagement Team.” This refers to the group of people who were managing the consultation process between January and May 2022. This group is made up of staff representatives of the Town, the staff representatives of the County and Brighter Community Planning.

Finally, we have written this report to be neutral. During the engagement process some participants thought our role was to convince the public of the merits of consolidation. This is not the case. Our role was always to listen and reflect what we heard back to Councils and to act as the facilitator around the key question. The role of a facilitator is to manage the conversation so that all who wish to be heard can be heard. Our role was and is to keep the conversation respectful, while also allowing the hard things to be said and heard, as well as creating space



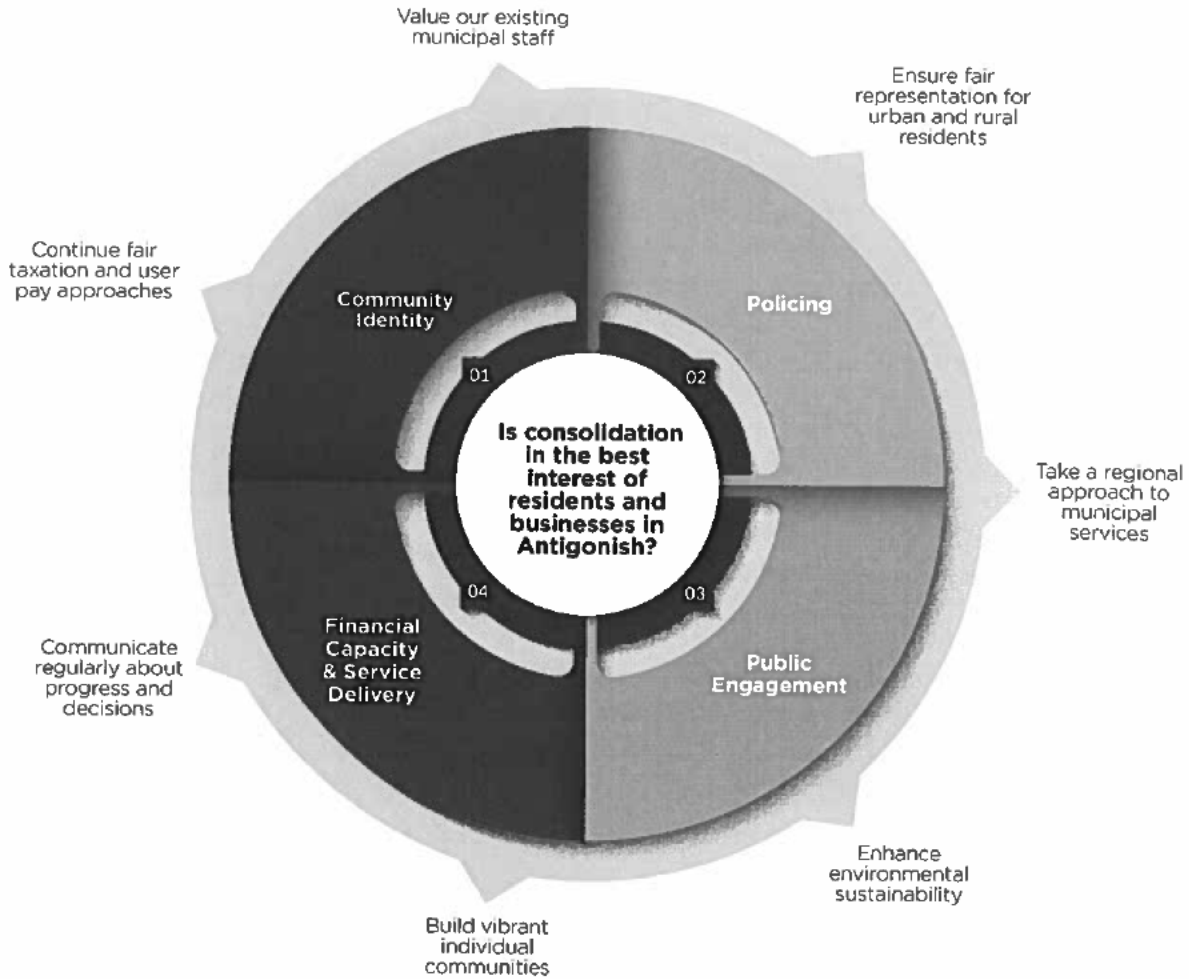
### THE ENGAGEMENT TEAM INCLUDES:

- BRIGHTER COMMUNITY PLANNING & CONSULTING
- STAFF AT THE TOWN OF ANTIGONISH
- STAFF AT THE COUNTY OF ANTIGONISH

for learning. A well done WWHR report might make you uncomfortable, as it may challenge your beliefs or personal ideals. Our aim is to bring forward the many points of view around a potential merger of the Town and the County.

# Making the decision

How will the public and stakeholder feedback be used by Councils to make their decision? Councils have many things to consider when deciding what is in the best interest of residents and businesses. Public input is just one factor. This decision wheel illustrates many of the factors Council must consider. Around the outside of the wheel are the Guiding Principles that were adopted by Councils to guide their decision.



# Plebiscites

During the engagement, a common topic was whether a plebiscite should be held and why Councils were not using this method of engagement.

A plebiscite is a form of democracy where people directly vote on policy issues. In the case of a municipal amalgamation in Nova Scotia, a plebiscite is non-binding – meaning that, even if a plebiscite is held, the final decision is made by the elected officials.<sup>1</sup> Historically in Nova Scotia, the main use of plebiscites has been to allow the sale of alcohol. Plebiscites are an uncommon tool in Nova Scotia when municipalities merge. Of the 11 municipal mergers attempts in Nova Scotia, one or more plebiscite was held in two of those situations.

A plebiscite was also used in a recent merger attempt among municipalities in Pictou County. In this case, the municipalities agreed that a plebiscite be held as a condition of their application to amalgamate. The NSUARB agreed with this condition. This plebiscite occurred after public engagement sessions were held, and resulted in a vote by the electors that was “overwhelmingly against amalgamation.” (New Glasgow (Town) (Re), 2016 NSUARB 114, 2016).

There have been instances where municipalities used a plebiscite to measure public support of a particular issue or concern. For example, in 2007 the Municipality of Clare held a plebiscite as part of the transfer of 24 electors from one polling district to another. In this case, the question was clear and straight forward, and the people who were entitled to vote were unambiguous. In a situation like Antigonish, understanding the strengths and weaknesses of using plebiscite is important (see inset box).

In 2012, there was discussion about dissolving the Village of Pugwash and potentially holding a plebiscite. Ultimately, the UARB decided not to hold a plebiscite, but it did identify questions that needed to be answered regarding the use of plebiscite.

- Who gets to vote: ratepayers or an elector as defined by the legislation? A person could be rate payer and not an elector.
- How do people become properly informed in order to make an informed vote? It was suggested that there would, “likely need to be facilitated discussions on the implications”.
- Votes can be divisive and should be overseen by a neutral body (O’Connell (Re), 2012 NSUARB 83 (CanLII), 2012)

THE MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS ACT, IN SECTION 14, DEFINES AN ELECTOR AS SOMEONE WHO IS 18, A CANADIAN CITIZEN, HAS RESIDED IN THE PROVINCE FOR THE LAST SIX MONTHS AND IS ORDINARILY A RESIDENT OF THE MUNICIPALITY. THIS DEFINITION OF AN ELECTOR IS THE ONE USED TO VOTE IN MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS.

<sup>1</sup> Definition for soft democracy taken from (Jaske, 2017)



**Antigonish Councils, when deciding to explore a merger, purposely chose to engage with residents to better understand issues and concerns rather than hold a plebiscite that doesn't allow for two-way communication. The reasons for this decision are:**

- There was significant concern that a plebiscite would cause deep and lasting divisions within the community. The experience of Pictou and the previous plebiscite held in Antigonish in 2006 were believed to leave lasting negative impacts on the community, individuals and families.
- Municipal consolidation involves a lot of information that is hard to summarize and share in a simple yes or no question. Providing opportunities for people to ask questions in smaller, more in-depth conversations would allow for a deeper understanding of issues by both the Councillors who will make the decision and those who would be impacted.
- Not everyone impacted by a potential consolidation would be able to vote in a plebiscite. For example, you could work every day in Antigonish and even own land or a business but not be eligible to vote - some business owners, seasonal residents, youth and students are examples of those who may not be eligible to vote but would be impacted by the results.
- Councils also wanted input from organizations as well as individuals. Organizations often bring a different perspective to the discussion, which should help influence a decision. Organizations sometimes also serve people who are traditionally marginalized or who consider themselves part of equity seeking groups. The engagement approach reflected a desire to hear from those who would normally not participate in the voting process or attend community sessions.
- Low participation rates in local plebiscites potentially undermine the legitimacy of the outcome. The cost of the plebiscite versus the benefits of getting advice through a vote from a small number of participants may put the value of the results into question.
- A belief that Councils are elected to make decisions, and, with the input of the public, Councils are legally and morally able to make this decision.

Many of the comments received were strongly in favour of a plebiscite. Although there appeared to be a link between those who opposed consolidation and the desire for a plebiscite, there were also those who supported consolidation who agreed a vote was necessary.

**The reasons provided by engagement participants in support of a plebiscite included:**

- It is anti-democratic to make such a decision without a vote.
- It is the best way to know if people support consolidation.
- The people/electorate will make the right decision for their communities.
- Councillors were not elected to consolidate, and no Councillors ran on a pro-consolidation platform. This merger was a surprise to many. If they had known about that a Councillor was going to explore municipal consolidation, it may have changed the way they voted in the last election.
- The engagement process is a work-around to avoid a plebiscite. This seems unfair and "sneaky."
- This is a huge decision that can't easily be undone. It is too big a decision for just a few people to make on residents' behalf.
- If a particular Councillor is in a conflict of interest and declares a conflict, then the constituents that Councillor represents will lose their voice and have no representation around the Council table when the decision is made. A vote will solve this problem.
- Every Councillor is in a conflict of interest. A plebiscite will eliminate any perception of a conflict.
- Without giving people a vote, it will be difficult to move forward and implement consolidation. There was some feeling that without a strong basis of trust in the process, if the Councils decide to proceed with consolidation, it will fail.
- A vote is the fair thing to do. It was felt that a plebiscite is a "right."
- The engagement sessions are helpful in laying the foundation for an informed electorate and now a plebiscite can occur.



THE PROVINCE OF NOVA SCOTIA ADOPTED LEGISLATION TO GUIDE MUNICIPALITIES REGARDING CONFLICT OF INTEREST. SECTION 4 OF THE MUNICIPAL CONFLICT OF INTEREST ACT LISTS THE SITUATIONS WHERE COUNCILLORS MAY HAVE A "DEEMED PECUNIARY INTEREST."

## First Voice



*I am not in favour of amalgamation and the process used to inform residents justified my opinion. The survey is not accessible. To voice one's opinion at the engagement session was not transparent. There should be a questionnaire available at the presentation for one to check off their opinion. The brochure mailed out to the public should have indicated that residents did not have a vote. The financial statements from the town and county should have been publicized. Only Council was involved in the display which was put forth by a consultant.*

- Comment Card

*"Gaining feedback through these forums is not sufficient to truly gauge opinion."*

- Comment Card

*We would like to be able to vote on this decision. A lot of citizens feel this is a done deal. They feel it is not useful to attend the meetings. It is our tax dollars, and I feel we should vote as to whether we want it or not.*

- Comment Card

*I hope this amalgamation does not go forward, without vote, as people are very upset at not having their voices and votes heard.*

- Email

*We want a plebiscite.*

- Email

Although many comments were in favour of a plebiscite, there were other points of view. Many believed that a plebiscite should not occur and Councils should make the decision. **The reasons in support of Councils making the decision include:**

- Plebiscites are divisive. Some remembered the last plebiscite and did not want to go through that again. Some felt it was a painful and unfortunate period and it is not worthwhile to repeat it.
- It is an unnecessary step in the process and Councils should just make the decision and move on.
- It is a tool to stop a process that is good for Antigonish.
- There has been a lot of engagement and Councils should have a good sense of all the issues. In fact, individual Councillors should have studied this issue and are the best equipped to decide.
- Merging is the right decision and just get on with it. A plebiscite is an unnecessary delay.

## First Voice



*"It's time. No plebiscite."*

- Comment Card

*Thank you for taking a stand and doing the right thing. Please no plebiscite."*

- Comment Card

# SECTION 3: SUMMARY OF CONSULTATION ACTIVITIES

It is important to Councils to hear directly from the public. To do this, we used many tools to encourage participation and commentary from stakeholders. These tools included a mail-out to all civic addresses, a custom Antigonish.ca website, a special section on the process in County Connect, pop-up consultations, a toll-free phone line, an online engagement hub called HowSpace, emails, toll-free phone lines, workshops with specific groups and information sessions in each district and online webinars.



Figure 1 - Engagement Tools

The community information sessions used an Open House format, designed to allow for small group or individual conversations so that the Mayor, Warden and Councillors could hear directly from the public. After the first few sessions, the format was adjusted in response to participant feedback and a town hall/ question and answer period was incorporated into the remaining sessions.

The Councils jointly set the following as the objectives of the overall engagement program:

- To understand a variety of perspectives within the broader community that Councils will consider when deciding to proceed to the next step in the consolidation process.
- To educate the public as to why, at this point, consolidation is being considered as an option for the future of both municipal units.
- To let stakeholders know how to participate and to allow for participation using both virtual and in-person methods.
- To ensure that equity seeking groups are involved in the engagement.
- To understand potential impacts of consolidation on residents, businesses, and the overall community.

## County Connect and Community Mail-Out



Two community wide mail-outs were sent to support the engagement process. The first mail-out was a letter sent to 9,814 households in March inviting everyone to participate in the engagement. A colourful brochure, with a summary of fact sheets, common questions about the process and how to participate was shared in the semi-annual County Connect Newsletter and was mailed to 9,814 households early in April. These materials were also made available online and hard copies were also available at Town Hall and the Municipal Office.

## Emails and Phone Log



A dedicated email address was created for community members to send questions and comments. This email address was included in the two mail-outs sent in March. Individual Councillors who received emails about consolidation were encouraged to forward them to [info@antigonish.ca](mailto:info@antigonish.ca) and most did. In total, there were 170 emails received.

26 people left messages on the phone line and staff at the Town and County responded to a number of these directly. Those individuals who left names and telephone numbers for staff to follow-up with were called back. There were several anonymous voicemails, which were included as part of the communications log.

## Website

A custom website, Antigonish.ca, was created on February 8th. This webpage was created separately from the Town and County websites, which are used for service delivery and information sharing.

**Antigonish.ca** acted as both a link to **HowSpace** and a platform for sharing information. Between February 8th and May 15th, there were **1,958** unique users with more than **3,103** separate visits to this website. The website also encouraged the submission of emails to the **info@antigonish.ca** address.

The website was well promoted so that the public could access any online resources. The Antigonish.ca website was promoted through social media and included in the two mail-outs, as well as mentioned in radio advertising. Links to the Antigonish.ca website were also posted on the websites of both municipal units, which are regularly visited by the local community to find out about local events or Council activities.



## HOWSPACE



Howspace is an online engagement portal which encouraged conversations among stakeholders, participants, and members of the Engagement Team. People who signed up to the online portal received regular email updates and they could participate and view the conversations that were happening online.

HowSpace was chosen as a way to encourage discussion in a meaningful way that is separate and apart from traditional social media platforms like Facebook. HowSpace allowed participants to remain anonymous, which created space for people to feel comfortable asking questions.

A brief survey was conducted early in the engagement process, but due to technical issues there were few responses. The technical problems were quickly fixed so that there was good participation on Howspace throughout the engagement process.

Comments from the welcome page of Howspace, where the majority of comments were posted, are included in the appendix for information purposes.

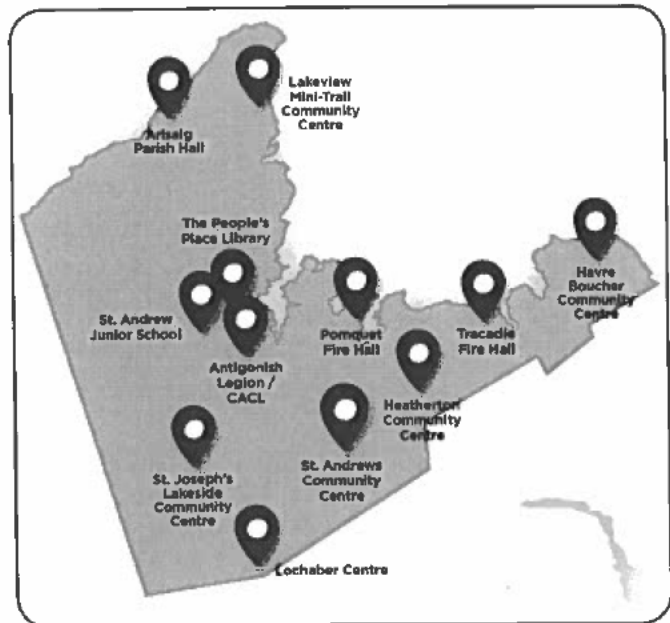
## Feedback on the Engagement Sessions

There were 17 information sessions held throughout the Town and County as part of the community engagement process. The timing of the sessions were varied so that as many people as possible could participate (e.g. lunch time, afternoon and evening). Childcare was offered at each session and all sites were accessible. In addition to the 17 sessions, we held three webinars which allowed participants to ask questions and have them answered.

There were also sessions for specific groups. For example, we held sessions with the Fire Chiefs and Deputy Chiefs, community leaders (which included local business leaders and representatives of the Chamber of Commerce), community organizations/non-profits and current and former Mayors and Wardens along with the current MLA and MPs representing the region.

The engagement team recognized the important relationship with Paqtnkek First Nation and the Mayor and Warden met with the Band Council and other representatives to discuss the possible consolidation of the Town and County and to answer questions. The Town and County were invited to Paqtnkek to host an information table as part of their career fair this past June. The Mayor and Warden, along with the CAOs attended this event to speak with members of the broader community.

The Municipalities held two pop up sessions - one at the farmers' market and the other on Main Street Antigonish - to talk with those who may not attend formal sessions and to reach those who may have been unaware of the potential consolidation discussions.





**ANTIGONISH WHAT WE HEARD REPORT**

Date	Place	Attendees	Format	Comment Cards
Apr. 6, 2022	Fire Chiefs' Meeting	13	Presentation+ Q&A session	
Apr. 7, 2022	Community Leaders	17	Presentation+ Q&A session	
Apr. 11, 2022	St. Joseph's	45	Open House	11
Apr. 11, 2022	Antigonish Library	43	Open House	13
Apr. 12, 2022	Lakevale	53	Open House	21
Apr. 13, 2022	Arisaig	27	Open House	6
Apr. 13, 2022	Antigonish Library	9	Open House	8
Apr. 27, 2022	Webinar #1	66	Webinar	
Apr. 30, 2022	Farmer's Market (Pop Up)	32	Pop-up	32
May 1, 2022	Legion	16	Open House	9
May 2, 2022	Heatherton	94	Open House/Q&A Session	11
May 2, 2022	Antigonish Library	21	Open House and Pop-Up	19
May 3, 2022	St. Andrew's Jr. School	23	Open House/Q&A Session	5
May 3, 2022	Legion	2	Open House	2
May 4, 2022	Tracadie	73	Open House/Q&A Session	36
May 5, 2022	St. Andrews Community Centre	50	Open House/Q&A Session	2
May 5, 2022	Webinar #2	24	Webinar	
May 9, 2022	Pomquet	69	Open house/Q&A Session	
May 11, 2022	Havre Boucher	94	Open House/Q&A Session	27
May 12, 2022	Community group meeting	10	Round Table	
May 12, 2022	Lochaber	24	Open House/Q&A Session	5
May 18, 2022	Webinar #3	23	Webinar	
June 27, 2022	Paqtnkek Mi'Kmaq Nation	12		0

The information sessions were planned in an open house format to promote more direct conversations with the Mayor, Warden, Councillors, CAOs, staff and the Brighter Community Planning team. The format allowed for people to drop in anytime during the session and talk with the engagement team. This format was heavily criticized. The engagement team felt that even though it was published that these were drop-in sessions, most people that arrived still expected a formal presentation followed by a question-and-answer period. It was difficult for the team to overcome these expectations. While some attendees vocalized their appreciation for the opportunity to have conversations directly with the decision-makers, ask questions and have a detailed discussion, the majority who commented on the format wanted a town hall/question and answer style meeting. **The reasons provided for this were:**

- People wanted to hear what their neighbours thought.
- People wanted to make sure everyone was hearing the same information.
- Some did not have any specific questions and wanted others to pose the questions so they could learn about the issues.
- People wanted a presentation before they asked any questions.
- People had to wait to talk to someone who could answer the questions or the person they talked to could not answer the questions they were asking.
- People did not want to hear from the consultants or municipal staff but wanted to hear directly from the local councillors.
- There was no place to sit down for those who needed to sit.
- People felt like they were being "managed" or "handled."
- The format did not create trust in the process.
- Some found conversations difficult to hear because of the room size and the number of people in attendance.
- Some wanted to see a debate and felt the question-and-answer format would allow that to happen.

## First Voice



*The process of getting resident feedback is very flawed. The town and county should do everything they can to make all of this more upfront. There should be more unbiased information available. There should, indeed be a plebiscite to decide this.*

*Many people don't even know it's happening, let alone how to get information or how to engage with the issue, even if they have information. It seems like a very shady practice, to hire outside consultants for hundreds of thousands of dollars, rather than engage directly with and for the public.*

As the sessions progressed, the meeting format was changed to allow for question-and-answer sessions. This meant that each session started with the open house format and then ended with a question-and-answer session. This format was well-received by those who attended.

Many people also liked the open house format as it allowed for more in-depth, detailed discussions. Some people expressed their dislike of community meetings because a small number of voices tend to dominate the discussion. They also believed that "town hall" style meetings tended to be aggressive or create conflict. Others said that they were not comfortable speaking in front of a group and liked the opportunity to have individual conversations.



## First Voice



*"Very well put together event and evening."*

- Comment Card

*"We are disappointed with the format of this meeting. We were expecting a presentation and an opportunity to ask questions."*

- Comment Card

*"I don't like the way the meeting was conducted. It should have involved everyone in the hall at the same time. That way we would have heard all the questions asked by everyone."*

- Comment Card

## Other Sessions

This report deals only with the engagement process organized by the Town and County of Antigonish. Community organized events and social media groups where representatives of the Town were not invited are not included in this report.

While discussion continues on these platforms, the documenting and tracking of the locally organized meetings and online forums is beyond the scope of this report.

## SECTION 4: THEMES

Several important themes about a possible consolidation of the Town and County emerged from the engagement activities and are outlined below.

While we included comments related to the process above, they are not included in this section. Although very important for Council to consider when deciding upon next steps, the process comments are about how Councils should make their decision rather than feedback on the possible consolidation itself. The themes below outline the issues and comments relating to the specific idea of consolidation, not the way in which the decision is being made.

### Opportunities and Risks

The most common theme was about the risks and benefits of a potential consolidation. We often heard people ask, "what are the pros and cons?" Some people thought that only the positive impacts of consolidation were being shared, without a full understanding of any risks or negative impacts.

Some people wanted to see a business plan with the details of what a merged municipality would look like. It appeared as though this group was looking for information about the long-term budget, both capital and operational, staffing, strategic initiatives and other details. This information was not available from either municipal unit as they believed that many of these decisions could only be made by a new Council or by a future Transition Committee.

In general, those who had concerns or opposed consolidation felt that there was no clear statement of the reasons why consolidation would benefit them or their local communities. Simply put, the opportunities associated with consolidation were not clearly demonstrated for this group. For example, one benefit of consolidation is that it would allow the two municipal units to speak with one voice, and that this cooperation would not be subject to future breakdowns in the relationship. Often, participants asked why the two units can't speak with one voice and remain separate.

A related comment was about the risks if the municipalities consolidated. Some people were concerned that without the "business case" there were just too many unknowns to proceed. More details were required before any decision regarding consolidation should happen.

## First Voice



*There does not seem to be concrete financial information for residents to form a decision e.g. what are the PROPOSED benefits for each service area; e.g. Garbage Collection, Current cost to Municipality? Current cost to Town? Proposed cost with consolidation? Saving? It seems we are going to find out where we stand AFTER the decision is made. All answers are hypothetical rather than based on concrete information.*

- Howspace Comment

*Be specific. What are the pros. What are the cons. Not the we don't know because if you don't know the pros then why be having this process!*

- Howspace Comment

Without these details, it was believed that the risk of the unknown was just too high. The example of the recently merged health boards was given by several participants as an example of how a merger has not benefited the local community, with one resident stating, "Bigger is not better."

Several opportunities to work together and potential benefits of consolidation were identified by community members. Examples of these opportunities were:

- **Efficiencies in staff** – There would be opportunities for current staff to be reallocated and provide new career opportunities within the merged structure. For example, if there was no longer a requirement for two directors of finance, perhaps one of the staff positions could be reassigned to secure additional funding from senior government, provide human resources or other administrative leadership, or lead a significant project at the municipal level.
- **Climate change adaptation and mitigation** – Consolidation would allow the two municipal units to plan and respond to climate related issues together. An example was provided of recent flooding in the Town which was related to barrier beaches being eroded out in the County. There needs to be regional planning to make sure that people's property and lives are protected, and some believe that kind of cooperation is not occurring now.

- **Accessibility** - Through consolidation, accessibility initiatives and compliance with provincial requirements can be better addressed. According to one participant, there are four different local committees currently addressing accessibility. Consolidation could provide more coordinated resources for accessibility to meet provincially mandated requirements.
- **Reducing confusion** - Some expressed confusion over which municipality does what, who collects the money and who delivers the service. By having one municipality, this confusion could be eliminated. The Fringe Area and the Town are physically integrated, and it is hard to tell what is in or out of Town. This confusion is made worse as the water and sewer services are provided by the Town and many within the Fringe area are regular users of the Town infrastructure. It makes sense to merge.
- **Reducing the bureaucracy** - Some expressed the opinion that the Town and County are over governed and that there is too much bureaucracy for such a small population.



## First Voice



*In closing, I am asking everyone to please weigh out the pros and cons for EACH municipality and I am sure that the positives far outweigh the negatives to join as one and become the Municipality of Antigonish. You were all voted in to make decisions, tough decisions, on behalf of your constituents, Let's make one, the right one, vote for consolidation and let's move forward together in a positive way."*

- Email

## Equity & Fairness

The issue of equity and fairness also emerged with some wanting to understand how consolidation will help address equity within the community. Topics such as affordable housing, accessibility, racism, women's issues, access to health care, access to social services and attracting and supporting immigrants fell into these categories.

## Service Delivery

Both municipalities provide services, either directly, by contract or by funding and supporting external organizations. Some participants were concerned about how these services and organizations would be impacted, particularly the local fire departments and RCMP. Recreational services, in general, were identified as an area where additional collaboration would make sense.

### Fire Departments

The engagement team, led by the Mayor and Warden, met with representatives of Fire Departments. Every fire department was invited to attend with 13 fire department representatives attending.

The main question from the fire department representatives and the public was about the structure of the fire departments after a potential merger. Specifically, if there were plans to change the existing structure of the fire departments to make it more uniform between the Town and County? There were also questions about whether a new municipal unit would mean fire trucks or fire department resources would be moved around to other fire departments. A related question was whether the geographical boundaries of the fire districts would change through a consolidation process.

Both municipalities were clear that there would be no changes to the structure or municipal support for volunteer fire services.

THE 9 VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENTS LOCATED WITHIN THE TOWN AND COUNTY THEY ARE:

- ANTIGONISH COUNTY VFD
- NORTH SHORE VFD
- FOUR VALLEY'S FD
- POMQUET EMERGENCY & RESCUE SERVICE
- TRACADIE VFD
- ST. ANDREWS & DISTRICT VFD
- AULD'S COVE VFD
- HARVRE BOURCHER & DISTRICT VFD
- TOWN OF ANTIGONISH VFD



The fire department representatives also made suggestions about opportunities for joint work on procurement and requested if a Memorandum of Understanding could be prepared to provide assurances to them.

### **RCMP Policing Contract**

Throughout the engagement sessions, both municipalities acknowledged the cost of the policing contract needs to be resolved before a decision on consolidation could be made. The creation of the Regional Municipality of West Hants triggered an unintended increase in policing costs for the new municipality. The Town of Windsor and District of West Hants had previously contributed 70% of the cost of policing; the new municipal unit was required to contribute 90% of policing costs. Mitigating strategies are being explored to avoid an increase in policing costs if consolidation is chosen.

When discussed by the public and elected officials, this issue was seen as fundamental and had to be resolved before any decision can be made about a possible consolidation.

### **Recreation**

Of all the departments in both municipalities, recreation is arguably the most integrated. This integration has been reported by some as a vast improvement over how things used to operate. It was reported by one participant that in the past the pool was used by both municipalities. This required that the lifeguards in the morning wore the uniform of the Town and followed Town policies and operations procedures, and in the afternoon had to change uniforms and follow a completely different set of County policies and enforce different rules. Now, both municipal recreation departments cooperate regularly on programs and communications, subject to their individual budgets and facilities.

In general, there was support for continued coordination regarding recreation programming, but it was unclear to some why consolidation had to happen to allow for this coordination.

### **Water Utility and Electrical Utility**

The Town operates an electrical utility which provides power to town residents. It is currently undertaking some exciting projects related to solar power and electric vehicle recharging facilities. County residents saw opportunities to join the electrical utility and expand it.

## First Voice



*“Can we join the local utility and leave NS power if we amalgamate? That would be excellent as we would have the utility back in our community hands and would have more power to de-carbonize our grid. There are so many opportunities to become more sustainable if we work together – town and county.*

- Howspace Comment

The electrical utility itself is regulated by the Nova Scotia Utility and Review Board (NSUARB) and provincial legislation, making it difficult to expand its customer base. Regardless of this challenge, there are opportunities to share in future alternate energy projects and expertise. For the water utilities, consolidation would present opportunities for joint planning, operations and management.

## Planning/Roads/Infrastructure

Land use was a concern for those living in the rural agricultural areas. Questions arose about whether agricultural uses would be restricted and if the by-laws used in the Town would be applied to rural areas. The Town by-laws were seen as a threat to agricultural land, hobby farms and rural activities. During the engagement sessions, the engagement team provided assurances that merging would not change municipal land use regulations, nor impose Town restrictions across different planning areas in the County. In addition, the provincial Farm Practices Protection Act supersedes any municipal by-law protecting agricultural landowners and their business.

J CLASS ROADS ARE MAINTAINED BY THE PROVINCE, BUT FALL UNDER A COST- SHARING AGREEMENT BETWEEN NOVA SCOTIA PUBLIC WORKS AND MUNICIPALITIES. MUNICIPALITIES CONTRIBUTE TO THE MAINTENANCE, AND CAPITAL UPGRADES ARE DIVIDED 50/50

Participants asked who would maintain roads, specifically the J class roads. There was some confusion that the rural roads the province currently maintains would become the responsibility of the new consolidated municipality. During the engagement sessions, it was confirmed that consolidation would not change funding to the J class road structure, nor remove the Nova Scotia Department of Public Works\* (formally called the Nova Scotia Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal) responsibility for maintaining County roads.

### First Voice



*Regardless of the way forward, we all need to find a way to agree that money spent on improvements and services in both municipal units doesn't just stay in that unit - that we are closely connected. Until we can agree that, then any attempt to consolidate will be doomed.*

- Howspace Comment

## Community Identity

Community identity is particularly important for residents and those in geographical areas that have linguistic, cultural, or social factors that make them unique or distinct. Community identity can also include a feeling of community shared by people in a specific rural area. The Antigonish area has unique communities with strong Scottish and Acadian heritage. People have an attachment to where they live - family connections, love of the land or love of community was apparent at the consultations we held.

In recent years, community identity has been affected by school closures and bussing students into regional centres, church closures and a variety of other changes that result in people turning to larger centres either for employment, recreational activity or shopping.

Many people within Antigonish have worked tirelessly for decades to support local institutions such as churches, community centres, recreational fields, parks, and graveyards. We saw this firsthand during the consultations by the high quality of the many community halls that are maintained and managed by local volunteers through fundraising and the wonderful people at these centres who hosted and provided snacks and drinks to participants. This "pride of place" is important for residents to not only maintain but to build upon.

There was concern expressed that local community's identities would be threatened and would get lost within a bigger consolidated municipality. There was concern by some that the unique qualities that people love about where they live would not be supported. This was particularly a concern in Tracadie, Pomquet and Harvre Boucher where there continues to be a strong Acadian community where French is still spoken.

POMQUET WAS FOUNDED IN 1774 BY FIVE FAMILIES. POMQUET HAS A LOCAL MUSEUM RUN BY THE ACADIAN HOLY CROSS SOCIETY, WHOSE MISSION IS TO STRENGTHEN THE CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC LIFE OF THE ACADIAN AND FRANCOPHONE COMMUNITY OF POMQUET AND ITS SURROUNDINGS. IT PROVIDES SUMMER JOBS, HOSTS A VIRTUAL MUSEUM AND RUNS A SEASON MUSEUM, AND IS IN PART SPONSORED BY THE COUNTY OF ANTIGONISH.

*(Société Acadienne Sainte Croix, n.d.)*

THE MUNICIPALITY OF THE COUNTY OF ANTIGONISH PROVIDES FUNDING TO COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS WITH THE INTENT OF ENABLING AND ENCOURAGING CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT IN THE COMMUNITY. IN 2022-23, THE BUDGET FOR THE COUNTY FOR GRANTS IS 3% OF THE OVERALL OPERATING BUDGET AND FOR THE TOWN IT IS ALSO 3% OF THE OVERALL OPERATING BUDGET.

## First Voice



*With consolidation, district boundaries will likely change. My worry (fear actually) is that Pomquet will become part of a larger district, and as such, lose its representation. Without a local voice in council, I fear that our unique Acadian community will not have the support it has had in the past.*

- Email

There was concern that within a consolidated municipality the interests and needs of the individual community would not be well represented around a new consolidated Council table. People wanted to see what the proposed electoral boundaries would be and how they would be represented within a merged structure.

There were also concerns that community grants that support many of the small organizations and events within the rural areas and the Town would not continue within a consolidated municipal unit. Many groups depend on the funding from the County, and County Councillors are allotted funds to disperse to community organizations and this is seen as important to maintain. The Town has its own community grants program. Organizations were assured by elected officials that maintaining this kind of support in merged municipality is a priority.

Others expressed that individual communities can be distinct within a larger municipal government and that the time of having many smaller municipal units was over. It was seen that "economies of scale" will allow Antigonish to benefit from efficiencies in areas such as procurement, hiring and public works.

## First Voice



*"I am in favour of consolidation as long as it advances equity and sustainability for our community. I feel this an opportunity for us to build more inclusive, vibrant and sustainable communities. I hope that the climate crisis and alleviating poverty is kept top of mind during the process."*

# Taxation

There was a great deal of concern regarding the potential impacts of a possible consolidation on taxation. Some of the **common misconceptions** were:

<p>Rural areas would pay the same tax rate as the Town and get no increase in services.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">⊗</p> <p style="text-align: center;">misconception</p>	<p>Taxes will go up.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">⊗</p> <p style="text-align: center;">misconception</p>	<p>The Town was in debt and needs the tax revenue of the county.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">⊗</p> <p style="text-align: center;">misconception</p>	<p>The Town's infrastructure was in poor repair and County residents would bear the burden of paying for future upgrades.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">⊗</p> <p style="text-align: center;">misconception</p>
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The engagement team provided facts during every session to respond to these misconceptions, but tax issues continued to be a concern. Concern was expressed that the taxation information provided in the fact sheets only reflected what happened in other merged municipalities. Some people felt strongly that there needed to be a financial plan for the merged municipality that could be reviewed to demonstrate that taxes would not go up.

Although both the Town and the County are in a positive financial situation, it was often stated that the Town needed the County taxes to fix roads or address other infrastructure needs. Even when informed about the Town's overall financial indicators and recent revenue generating initiatives, such as investments in alternative energy through AREA, some participants remained skeptical.

AREA (ALTERNATIVE RESOURCE ENERGY AUTHORITY) IS A 100% MUNICIPALLY OWNED COMPANY FORMED BY THE TOWNS OF ANTIGONISH, BERWICK AND MAHONE BAY. IT IS FOCUSED ON ALTERNATIVE ENERGY PRODUCTION, AREA PROVIDES FINANCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS TO EACH OF ITS MEMBER TOWNS THROUGH DEVELOPING AND MANAGING WIND FARMS, SOLAR PROJECTS AND OTHER ENERGY RELATED PROJECTS  
[WWW.AREANS.CA](http://WWW.AREANS.CA)



## First Voice



*What does this mean for us? Nothing but higher taxes."*

- Email

*The graphs displayed in the brochure clearly show a reduction in town taxes, but no change in municipal taxes. In terms of the tax rate, what benefit is there to the municipality? I'm not in the know about tax rates and how it all works, but at first glance, it seems that with consolidation, the municipality will be subsidizing town taxes."*

- Email

Applicable tax rates in four communities as approved for fiscal 2021/22. Rates would continue to be based on services available and the municipalities do not expect increases as a result of consolidation.

**DESCRIPTION      ASSESSMENT      RATE      TAXES**

**1. Arisaig Tax Bill**

Residential Assess.	\$200,000	\$0.880	\$1,760.00
4 Valley's Fire Levy (Max)			\$200.00
<b>Amount Due</b>			<b>\$1,960.00</b>

**2. Fringe Area Tax Bill**

Residential Assess.	\$200,000	\$0.880	\$1,760.00
Fire Hydrant Levy	\$200,000	\$0.114	\$228.00
ACVFD Rate	\$200,000	\$0.070	\$140.00
Thorne Ridge Streetlights			\$21.34
Sewer (1 unit)			\$316.29
<b>Amount Due</b>			<b>\$2,465.63</b>

**3. Heatherton Tax Bill**

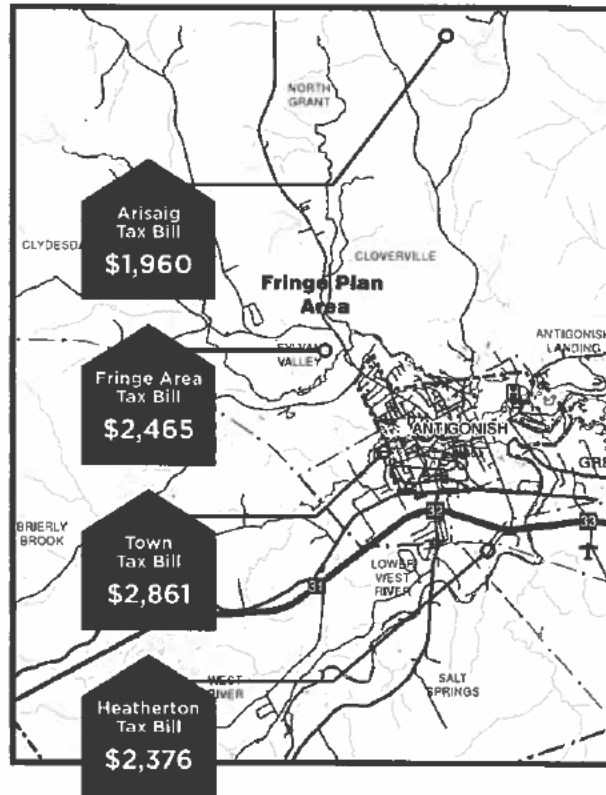
Residential Assess.	\$200,000	\$0.880	\$1,760.00
Fire Levy	\$200,000	\$0.150	\$300.00
Sewer (1 Unit)			\$316.29
<b>Amount Due</b>			<b>\$2,376.29</b>

**4. Town Tax Bill**

*To allow for a comparison with County rates, the Town Residential Rate is further broken down to show amounts associated with the fire department and streetlights.*

General Rate		\$0.967	\$1,934.20
Town Fire Dep.	\$200,000	\$0.122	\$244.00
Street Lights		\$0.021	\$41.80

Residential Assess.	\$200,000	\$1.110	\$2,220.00
Fire Hydrant Levy	\$200,000	\$0.037	\$74.00
Sewer (avg.)			\$228.41
Solid Waste (1 unit)			\$339.29
<b>Amount Due</b>			<b>\$2,861.70</b>



# Administration and Legal



Before the public engagement process began, municipal staff were briefed. This reflects the importance that both Councils place on staff and the need to provide timely and relevant information to them while consolidation is being considered.

We met with staff at both municipalities several times and in different work locations. Staff also participated in an online comment portal where information was shared. Information responding to concerns raised was provided, and then follow up meetings occurred with any staff who had further questions.






Organizational change, or even the consideration of a change, can be stressful for employees. When engaging with staff, some raised a few concerns, but many saw consolidation as an opportunity. Regardless, there appeared to be a strong desire by staff for Councils to make a final decision so that the employees could move forward with projects and make personal decisions, such as retirement planning.

When engaging with staff, there were questions and comments including:

- Whether union and non-union staff will be integrated.
- Whether there would be lay-offs or elimination of positions.
- There were very strong and effective teams which were worried about including or integrating new people who come from a different organizational culture and approach.
- What was the organizational culture at the other municipal unit and if the work of staff at the other municipality was similar?
- What will the new organizational structure be?
- Will consolidation have impacts on seniority and the pay structure?

Aside from staff, the public also had questions about how consolidation would impact staffing levels, how a union and non-union situation would be managed, and whether there were specific examples of staff efficiencies that could be created through consolidation.

On the whole, there were not many questions on legal or administrative issues posed by the public. Those we received included:

 <p><b>Where will the municipal office be? Will there still be two buildings?</b></p>	 <p><b>Will the by-laws of the Town be enforced in the County?</b></p>	 <p><b>Is a plebiscite required by provincial legislation?</b></p>	 <p><b>What is conflict of interest for municipal Councillors and how is it applied?</b></p>	 <p><b>Will I be able to vote for the Mayor if municipalities merged?</b></p>
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## Public Confidence

Perhaps the trickiest issue to characterize and summarize is something we are calling public confidence. In general, many of the comments received showed a lack of confidence in the process, the municipal leaders and the relationship between the Town and County.

Some expressed their mistrust of the Town's motives, reflected by comments that "the Town needs our taxes" and "this is just a land grab." Others spoke of the County being taken over by the Town, which implied that the County would lose its voice. For some, the distrust between the Town and the County is deep seeded and long standing. This was evident in multiple conversations across the various locations of the community.

IN 2006, A PLEBISCITE TO MERGE ANTIGONISH WAS DEFEATED. ALMOST 84 PER CENT OF COUNTY VOTERS WERE IN FAVOUR, WHILE 74 PER CENT IN THE TOWN WERE AGAINST IT.

THERE WAS ONLY A 45 PERCENT TURN OUT RATE FOR THE VOTE.

### First Voice



*When we went to school in Antigonish. We were treated as dirt as we were from the "sticks." No concern for county residents at all. -NO"*

- Excerpt from Comment Card

The plebiscite held in 2006 seemed to aggravate some of those feelings of mistrust and division between the two municipalities. According to some, it was an unfriendly process and is still top of mind twenty years later. The calls for a plebiscite were often framed in terms of the municipalities trying to "hide" something.

Some people felt that the proposed consolidation was being forced on them through a top-down process. Others expressed a concern that the idea of consolidation was not raised during the last municipal election. For these people, the merger discussion appeared to be a surprise.

## First Voice



*This should be an election issue for the next municipal election. This would allow councillors to have this issue as part of their platform. This would allow the public and to have a say. None of our councillors were elected to vote on such an important issue!* - Comment Card

Finally, during the engagement sessions it was reported that some Councillors may not be able to vote on the consolidation decision because they may be in a conflict of interest. This discussion of conflict of interest caused a great deal of confusion and anger and seemed to further erode the public confidence in the process.

## First Voice



*The other issue I have is that our councillor was informed that he is in a conflict of interest which means the people in our district do not have a voice!!!! Why was he not informed of this in Sept when Council voted to explore - if he was allowed to vote to explore, then he was not in conflict in September so why now is he in conflict. Leads to mistrust.*

- Comment Card

*Your presence is friendly and inviting which is a positive step. Being informative about the other leaders you consulted with in regards to this idea is important for residents' confidence in the process.*

- Howspace Comment

*There is a lot of distrust of the process because we are only being told the pros of Consolidation and are blown off when we ask for the cons. It's impossible that there is no downside to Consolidation - just be honest with us.*

- Howspace Comment

# SECTION 5: WHAT WE DID

During the process there were suggestions and ideas from participants and the engagement team responded. Below is a list of the suggestions and how we responded.

SUGGESTED ACTIONS	RESPONSE	GOING FORWARD
Hold a plebiscite.	Town Council considered a motion on plebiscite in May and voted to not hold one at this time. County Council maintained the position from the outset that no changes in the process are planned until Council receives the What We Heard Report.	Councils will receive this report and decide next steps.
Fire department suggested having an MOU and that no changes be made to the current structure	Commitments by both Mayor and Warden that there will not be any changes to fire department structure.	The concept of an MOU can be explored in the future as part of regular meetings with the Fire Chiefs.
If consolidation occurs, then ensure that grant funding to organizations will continue.	Mayor and Warden stated that the grant funding to organizations will be maintained.	Consider maintaining the current grant formulas and extending the County Councillor's grant policy in a merged unit.
Confirm impact of policing contracts before a final decision is made on consolidation.	Both municipalities are working with the provincial and federal government to get the necessary information. No vote is expected until this information is received.	Await a response from the provincial and federal governments before a final decision is made.
Request to adjust meeting formats to have town hall style meetings	The format of the meetings was adapted to a hybrid style in response.	Any future meeting format to include question and answer sessions.
Slow the process to allow people more time to review the information.	The original date for Councils' decision was the end of June. A decision is now expected in the fall of 2022.	Councils to consider timing of final decision.

Cont. →

SUGGESTED ACTIONS	RESPONSE	GOING FORWARD
Prepare a business case on consolidation so the public can better understand the impacts.	The Town and the County undertook an exercise to prepare a model budget so that the public can understand what the financial impacts of a merged municipality may be. This exercise showed that there is no expected increase to tax rates.	Additional financial information is being considered.
The information originally circulated did not have an analysis of commercial tax rates. There were requests for this information to be prepared.	Impacts on the commercial tax in other mergers were examined. It showed that there should be no impact on the commercial tax rate. This information was shared with the Antigonish Chamber of Commerce.	Information on commercial tax rates has been circulated.
At the community group meeting, it was suggested that a merged municipality explore having a dedicated person to work with community groups and housing organizations.	This request was documented and passed on to each municipal unit.	Consider holding future meetings with community groups.
Combine the accessibility committees into one and provide an honorarium for participation.	This suggestion is referred to the municipalities to consider.	Consider combining accessibility committees and take joint action on accessibility initiatives.
Identify areas where there was confusion and add additional FAQ to the website.	Completed.	Post FAQs on Antigonish.ca website.

## Issue Clarification

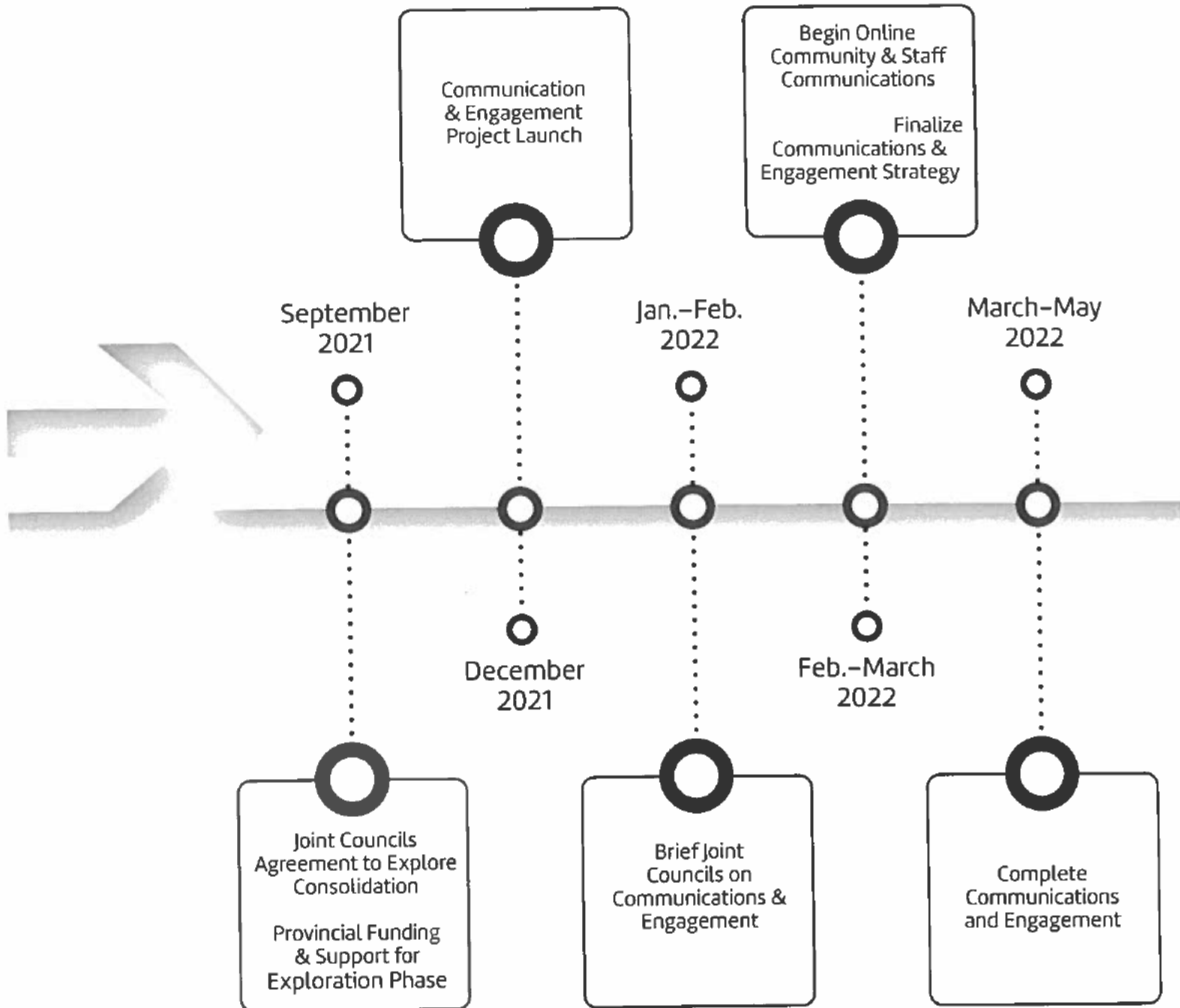
We also identified comments made to the engagement team that appeared to be inaccurate or false. We know people want the best for their communities, but it is easy for inaccurate information to be circulated through social media and for these statements to be taken as fact. Inaccurate statements erode trust in a process that strives to be open and transparent.

It is important to distinguish between comments that are not supported by the facts and comments that represent differences in perspectives or opinions. We provide this list so that these matters of fact can be clarified. Below are statements we heard as part of the engagement that are not consistent with the facts as we know them.

INACCURATE STATEMENT	CLARIFYING INFORMATION
There is no way that taxes will not go up.	After reviewing the financials of both municipalities and an assessment of financial capacity and the effects of consolidation on tax rated based on the previous year's audited financial statements, we can confirm that the tax rate will not increase as a result of consolidation itself.
The only Councillors who are in a conflict are those who oppose consolidation.	A conflict of interest is based on an individual Councillor's circumstances. Conflict of interest for municipal councillors is guided by provincial legislation, not by the Mayor or Warden, or the staff at the Town or County.
The by-laws of the Town will apply to the County and I won't be able to have chickens or continue to farm.	The Zoning, Noise and other related by-laws will not change because of consolidation. They may change if Councils, regardless if they merge or not, decide to do so. Any change would require public engagement, public notice, and the municipality to follow a formal legal process established by provincial legislation.
Information is being kept from us. There must be more that they are not sharing.	Everything that could be shared was and continues to be shared. Antigonish.ca is updated regularly.
The vote will happen behind closed doors.	The vote by each municipality will happen in open Council and all members of the public are welcome to attend these Council meetings.
The Town is almost broke and needs the tax dollars from the County.	The Town is in good financial shape when compared to other towns of its size in Nova Scotia. This has been independently verified by the Province as part of its municipal financial indicators program.
If consolidation does not occur, then the Province will force us to merge.	There is no indication from the Province that it is considering forcing municipalities to amalgamate. The last forced amalgamation was more than 20 years ago.
This is just a land grab by the Town.	Both Councils unanimously voted to consider consolidation. There are many reasons to explore consolidation, but a land grab is not one of them.

# Antigonish Consolidation Communications & Engagement Project

## Initial Timeline for Potential Consolidation





If Decision to Consolidate is Taken



Reporting on Communications and Engagement Issues

Provincial Liaison - legislation and transition funding

Target Date for Potential Consolidation

September 2022

Spring 2022

June-July 2022

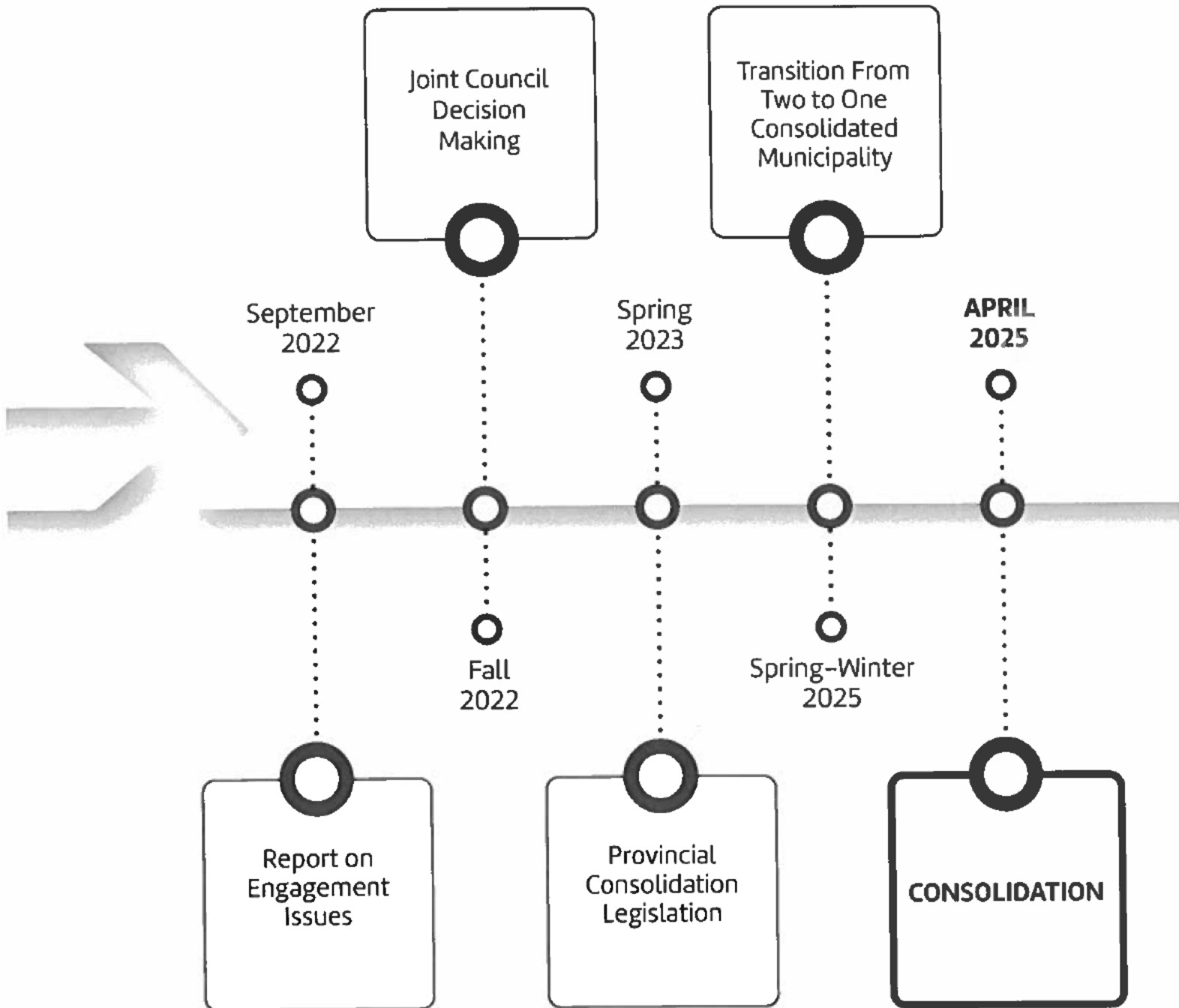
Winter 2022

2024

Joint Councils Decision-Making about Consolidation

Provincial Special Legislation for Consolidation  
Transition Steering Committee, Co-ordinator, Process

# Revised Timeline for Potential Consolidation





## SECTION 6: CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

It is now up to both Councils to review the submissions and comments, review any additional information they may need and decide what the next steps will be. As the facilitators of this community engagement and communications process, we can offer some general conclusions with this report.

### 1.

There were lots of concerns about the process of decision-making and consultation that should proceed a decision on possible consolidation. It will be up to each council to determine whether these concerns represent a majority of public opinion, or whether they are important considerations but not necessarily universally held.

### 2.

In hindsight, it is easy to identify things that could have been done differently in the consultation and engagement process, but consultation about an issue of future governance is often difficult to fully plan in advance. For Councillors, it will be important to think about whether they feel individual communities and the greater Antigonish area have had an opportunity to provide input before making any decision on how to go forward.

### 3.

We continue to suggest the ideas put forward in the Guiding Principles are critical to this process, particularly those about providing regular information, valuing municipal staff, and promoting community identity.

### 4.

While there are some unknowns in terms of future financial conditions, downloading or new program requirements that might impact consolidation, there will still be opportunities for the municipal partners to update and inform the larger community about financial progress, risks, and actions to address risks. We note that both municipalities have again passed balanced budgets for 2022-23 since the engagement process was completed. This should provide confidence that both municipal units are in good financial positions. It also provides an example of the kind of financial reporting that is very important.

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