



To: Mayor and Council of the Town of Antigonish
Warden and Council of the County of Antigonish

From: Brighter Community Planning & Consulting

Date: 2022-10-20

Re: Final Report Antigonish Community Engagement on Possible Consolidation

cc: Jeff Lawrence, CAO, Town of Antigonish
Glenn Horne, CAO, County of Antigonish

Introduction

Since late in 2021, following a decision by both Town and County of Antigonish Councils to explore municipal consolidation, Brighter Community Planning (BCP), in partnership with PR Hive and Brian Smith, conducted a comprehensive community engagement process.

This engagement process has produced several reports, fact sheets and electronic communications, all of which are available to support this summary report of the process, our understanding of the decision to follow, and some general guidance for that decision. *The What We Heard Report* was issued on September 15, 2022 and it provides a summary of the public and community feedback received during the engagement process.

This report briefly outlines the key components in the engagement process, links to the overall consolidation decision facing both Councils and finally, provides some commentary about the elements of that decision. To help provide a framework for the tremendous amount of information that Councils are receiving as part of their decision, this report outlines the four general areas that Councils will be considering. Finally, this report also summarizes the public feedback received in response to the What We Heard Report.

Guiding Principles for Consolidating Antigonish Town and County:

- 1. Take a regional approach to municipal services:** Work creatively, deliberately, and visibly to improve municipal services, economic development, tourism, culture, and community infrastructure for all residents and businesses in the Antigonish region.
- 2. Build vibrant individual communities:** Promote community identity in rural, urban and First Nations communities, so the whole municipality will be stronger.
- 3. Communicate regularly about progress and decisions:** Communications with residents, businesses, councils, and staff should be frequent, transparent, and inclusive.
- 4. Continue fair taxation and user pay approaches:** Residents and businesses should only be taxed for services and infrastructure they have access to. Property tax rates and infrastructure debt should utilize area tax rates and utility fee approaches that exist today wherever possible.
- 5. Value our existing municipal staff:** The blending of Town and County employees will recognize the value, knowledge and dedication of our current staff and every effort will be made to retain staff and to provide new opportunities.
- 6. Ensure Fair Representation for Urban and Rural Residents:** District boundaries should ensure every voter has the same electoral power as every other voter, balance rural and urban interests, and recognize local communities of interest.
- 7. Enhance environmental sustainability:** Ownership of the Antigonish electric utility is central to expanding green energy options and reducing our carbon footprint. Build upon the success of initiatives and partnerships with the Alternate Energy Resource Authority and the Municipality's Energy Management Plan.

Feedback on the WWHR

The WWHR report was made public on September 15th and the public had two weeks to provide comment on the report. The comment period was for the public to identify any gaps or errors in capturing and summarizing the feedback from the public. It was not to seek additional feedback on the issue of municipal merger itself.

Due to the impacts of Hurricane Fiona, the Town and County both extended the comment period until October 18th at 4.00 PM. In total, the comment period was open for 34 days.

Nineteen (19) individual comments were received and form letters from 50 unique users. There was also one voice mail. What follows is a summary of the feedback. One email from a Councillor was also received which is not included as Councillors as the focus of this report is on the view of the public.

The form letter offered the following perspective:

- The WWHR does not answer the questions raised by the public
- The WWHR report is about the consolidation process rather than the dissolution and merger process, which the writer believes is substantially different.
- That more engagement is necessary on the dissolution/merger process and a plebiscite must occur.

The 19 other pieces of correspondence, for the most part, reiterated concerns or opinions already expressed in the WWHR. These include:

- Requests for additional information
- Desire for a plebiscite and concern about a lack of democratic process
- Expressions of support for, but mostly against, consolidation.
- Concerns with the engagement process
- Expression about trust and sharing of information

There were two main issues of concern expressed in the submissions.

1. Several people expressed concern that the merger process has fundamentally shifted from a consolidation to a dissolution process, and that this change requires Councils to restart the engagement process and provide more information on the impacts of dissolution and how it differs from consolidation.
2. Others said that the WWHR did not answer all the questions raised by the public during the engagement activities and was identified in the WWHR. The public wants more

information, about what the dissolution of the Town means to tax payers, to the utilities (water and electric) and to staff.

When the WWHR was released, the public was asked to submit feedback on any themes or issues they felt were missing from the report. Of all the feedback received, one additional theme emerged regarding the dissolution of the Town.

During the public engagement sessions there was still an outstanding question around policing and the arrangements for a contract. This past summer, Town and County officials received further answers around policing and how a consolidated unit could proceed so long as the name, Municipality of the County of Antigonish remained the same. A [news release](#) issued by the Town and County shares the findings of these discussions with the provincial and federal government.

Other comments offered by the public include:

- The bibliography of the WWHR contained references that were not current, with all being over 10 years old.
- There is a lack of hard data in the WWHR indicating how many supported consolidation and how many were opposed.
- The WWHR is moot because the engagement was based on consolidation not the dissolution of the Town.
- Hurricane Fiona made it difficult to provide comment on the WWHR. More time is needed.
- The symbol for the new municipality should be inclusionary of the various ethnic groups who live here.
- The WWHR was slanted, left out important information, and is not the best tool to reflect the public opinion on the issue.
- Public opinion on this needs to be measured through a plebiscite. The WWHR is not sufficient.
- That not enough of the voters of Antigonish were engaged regarding the potential merger through the engagement sessions.

The Antigonish Consolidation Decision-Making Wheel

As explained previously in the *What We Heard Report*, over the course of attending community information workshops, listening to questions and comments, and assimilating the input received, Brighter Community Planning developed the concept of a “wheel”, to bring together the key issues to be considered in terms of a possible consolidation.

Figure 5 - Consolidation Decision-Making Wheel



This Antigonish Decision-Making Wheel has the key question in the centre: “Is consolidation in the best interests of residents and businesses in Antigonish.” The spokes or segments of the wheel contain four issues that capture the important considerations for Councils to think about when the time comes for a decision about municipal consolidation. Sprinkled around the wheel, in no particular order, are the Guiding Principles established at the outset of the Communication and Engagement Plan, to guide a possible consolidation of the Town and County. After many weeks of community engagement and consultation, here is how the BCP Team see the four issues around this Wheel shaping up:

Community Identity:

Summary of Issue	Relevant Guiding Principle
<p>This concept has been described differently by many people, but a key concern is that the diverse individual communities within the County, and the Town itself, would somehow be lost in a new greater Antigonish municipal organization. Individual communities value their differences, their community facilities and their people. The public does not want these differences lost in some new bureaucratic organization.</p>	<p>GUIDING PRINCIPLE #2 Build vibrant individual communities.</p> <p>GUIDING PRINCIPLE #6 Ensure fair representation for urban and rural residents.</p>

Policing

Summary of Issue	Relevant Guiding Principle
<p>This issue is not one that came up as a service level concern during the public engagement process, because both Town and County utilize RCMP for police services. It is however a fundamental financial issue for the two Councils, in terms of possible changes in the existing municipal funding arrangements for Town and County under a merged municipal police structure. Although the Town and County cannot change the existing contractual arrangements in place for RCMP services in Nova Scotia, legal advice has provided a mechanism to address this issue. This mechanism would change the process of consolidation in terms of</p>	<p>GUIDING PRINCIPLE #1 Take a regional approach to municipal services</p> <p>GUIDING PRINCIPLE #2 Continue fair taxation and user pay approaches.</p>

dissolving the Town and merging it with the County, rather than dissolve both organizations to create a new regional municipality under the Municipal Government Act. Everything else in terms of Guiding Principles and consolidation itself would remain the same.

Public Engagement

Summary of Issue	Relevant Guiding Principle
<p>The What Was Heard Report provides a summary of a very intensive consultation and engagement process that has had the benefit of strong attendance and participation from different communities of interest, different organizations and a wide cross section of the public. The possible consolidation of Town and County will not be supported by everyone involved, and further engagement will be essential if the merger should proceed. Having said this, many people and organizations have had an opportunity to learn about the possible merger, to ask questions and to hear or read responses. Members of Council should have a good understanding of the issue, of the concerns raised, and of the possible answers and future direction required.</p>	<p>GUIDING PRINCIPLE #3, Communicate regularly about progress and decisions.</p>

Financial Capacity and Service Delivery

Summary of Issue	Relevant Guiding Principle
<p>In the community consultation process, there were concerns raised about one or the other unit needing financial assistance from the other. The fact is that both units are in very good financial condition when measured alongside their peer municipal units. The County has significant assessment growth and a strong infrastructure improvement plan in place, and it is expanding things like solar energy. The Town has stable assessment, unlike many small towns in Nova Scotia, and it has played a significant role in creating a new revenue stream by expanding the activities of its electrical utility. There are opportunities to improve and streamline both organizations financially, but neither is faced with the kind of precarious finances that influenced towns like Bridgetown and Springhill.</p> <p>While both staff meetings and community sessions have identified concerns about forming a single organization from two smaller organizations, with different approaches to labour management and possible duplication of positions, the experience of other municipalities, the reality of retaining experienced municipal staff performing complex roles and the opportunities to create new roles through administrative efficiencies should provide some comfort on this issue.</p>	<p>This issue is about “how” to achieve consolidation, and it would be guided by several of the Guiding Principles:</p> <p>GUIDING PRINCIPLE #1. Take a regional approach to municipal services</p> <p>GUIDING PRINCIPLE #4. Continue fair taxation and user pay approaches</p> <p>GUIDING PRINCIPLE #5. Value our existing municipal staff</p> <p>GUIDING PRINCIPLE #6. Enhance environmental sustainability</p>

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS FOR COUNCILS

It has been our pleasure to work with Councils, Staff, the Engagement Team members, and community representatives, all of whom have contributed to the completion of this important process. Whether it was being welcomed into community halls, having important conversations in a respectful environment, or being offered home-made treats at breaks, we were honoured to learn more about Antigonish.

As Councillors consider this report itself, we suggest there are several important conclusions or questions to be considered:

Do the Key Themes and questions identified in the engagement process represent a majority of public opinion?

It will be up to each Council to determine whether particular concerns represent a majority of public opinion or whether these are important considerations but not universally held.

Has the greater Antigonish area had an opportunity to provide input?

There are things that could have been improved or done differently, but the essential thing now is to think about whether individual communities have all had an opportunity to provide their input.

How will the Guiding Principles inform Council decision-making?

We continue to believe that the Guiding Principles are critical to this process, and should be viewed as significant signposts along a possible journey to consolidation.

How will the larger community be updated regularly about the process?

Should Councils decide to proceed with a merger, they should ensure that information about the process is provided to residents, businesses and other stakeholders regularly. Misinformation will often fill a vacuum, and lead to concerns and confusion.

Does the process of the Town's dissolution and merger into the County require any additional engagement?

As we understand it, the Town's dissolution and merger with the County does not fundamentally impact the information shared with the public regarding tax rates, staff impacts, community identify and the benefits/risks of consolidation. However, we defer to the analysis provided by staffs to Councils.