



Nova Scotia restructuring offers new model for consolidation



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Nova Scotia's first municipal consolidation in more than 20 years is gaining attention as, potentially, a new model for consolidating two already stable and viable municipalities that are convinced they can achieve even more by coming together.

The Municipality of the District of West Hants and the Town of Windsor, vibrant municipalities within an hour of Halifax, are now well advanced in the process of bringing the municipalities together. This process began in July 2018 when the municipalities asked the province to pass the necessary legislation. Three months later, the legislation was passed and two months after that, in December, I was selected through a procurement process as project coordinator. The new municipality will be launched on April 1, 2020.

The project coordinator's job is to manage the consolidation in conjunction with a coordinating committee that includes Windsor Mayor Anna Allen, Deputy Mayor Laurie Murley, West Hants Warden Abraham Zebian, and Deputy Warden Paul Morton. Professional support is coming from the two chief administrative officers (CAOs) of Windsor and West Hants, Louis Coutinho and Martin Laycock, and their staffs. The province has provided \$1.5 million to support the consolidation work.

Making the Case for Amalgamation

Nova Scotia municipalities have been well studied. Over the last 50 years, many thoughtful studies have consistently recommended streamlining Nova Scotia's 50-plus municipal units. The recommendations have generally been ignored, but the need for

top-drawer municipal governance has not diminished. Meanwhile, the challenges for both urban and non-urban municipalities have arguably grown.

While the case for consolidation is often clear to the consultants and the academics, the fear of change has deterred many. The loss of local heritage, of local identity, and the possible fracturing of the highly personal relationships that now exist between taxpayers and their municipal representatives have caused many to shy away from transformative change. That has led, in many cases, to crises as municipalities have lost their viability and dissolution became the only option.

Windsor and West Hants, two viable municipalities with relatively stable populations (3,700 and 15,000, respectively), weren't going to let that happen to them. Municipal leaders in those communities recognized that change of some sort was desirable and they were determined to create their own future to the best of their abilities.

West Hants Warden Zebian says the decision to consolidate "while both municipal units are at their peaks of strength was the single best and most important decision ever made in the history of these two municipal units." He's convinced that, because of the consolidation, "we will eliminate the competitive nature that has plagued our community in the past while focusing on our strengths as a single, unified municipality ... We will continue an upwards growth trajectory, both economically and population wise."

Windsor Mayor Allen says the consolidation project is the most important and rewarding project

she's been involved with. "Change is not just the responsibility of the federal and provincial governments; it is also our responsibility, starting at the grass roots," she says. "It's up to us to deliver the best municipal services possible to our residents. I am very excited about the future here. The possibilities are endless."

Mayor Allen and Warden Zebian, along with their councils and CAOs, deserve enormous credit for their leadership. They did their due diligence and concluded that the municipal structures established long ago were no longer compatible with the region achieving its best future.

Trusting in the Consolidation Process

As the Coordinating Committee embarked on the consolidation journey, it was recognized that, in and of itself, the process had to be right. The process needed to have the community's understanding and trust. For the new regional municipality to be launched successfully in 2020, the community would need to believe that the key merger issues had been addressed thoughtfully and transparently and that, where necessary, reasonable compromises had been achieved.

The Coordinating Committee agreed that it would meet the first and third Monday of every month – alternating the meeting location between the respective municipal council chambers – and that all meetings would be open to the public. Terms of Reference were adopted to provide transparency around committee decision making and process. It was also agreed that studies commissioned by the Coordinating Committee would be made public.

Working together, and with strong support from the Nova Scotia Department of Municipal Affairs, a project work plan was developed in March with scheduling milestones and the

necessary related studies. The work plan remains a regular agenda item for each meeting to allow the committee to monitor progress.

Progress Continues to Build

As of late May, good progress was being made.

A contract was awarded in December for the review of issues surrounding council size and polling districts. By mid-April, we had the consultant's report and recommendations that now form the basis for our application to the Nova Scotia Utility and Review Board, which will make the final determination on council size and polling districts. The consultant's work was guided by input gathered from an online and hard copy survey and meetings throughout the two municipalities. Direct survey responses were received from about 800 residents.

Another consultant was retained to help the Coordinating Committee better understand, for example, how best to combine the two existing administrative structures and work forces. The committee hired a communications firm to develop a public engagement and information strategy. Following a national search for a CAO, Mark Phillips (current CAO for the Town of Kentville, Nova Scotia, and a 20-plus year member of the Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators) begins his new job on September 16. With further consulting support, an asset registry is being developed that will be essential to understanding the condition of critical infrastructure and associated maintenance and replacement costs.

Other municipal players are watching our work. Patrick Tighe, Deputy Mayor of Sturgeon County, Alberta, is among those who have arranged for a direct briefing. He says he believes that the process, and the results, are of national interest.

The Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities (NSFM) is also paying

attention. At an NSFM workshop in May, after hearing a discussion with the Coordinating Committee, Councillor Lee Nauss, who has served for 52 years on the council of the Municipality of the District of Lunenburg, said if he has one regret after a half-century of municipal service, it is that he did not push harder for some sort of consolidation of neighbouring municipalities on the south shore of Nova Scotia.

As Progress Continues, Conclusions Are Reached

Much work remains in Windsor and West Hants.

Even as conclusions on the key issues are reached, we recognize more residents of these municipalities will be drawn into the discussions. They will have their own learning curves as they increasingly become engaged; they will want information and they will want reassurance. And we need to listen.

That's the way it should be when you're breaking new ground, following a new path. We will not have done a good job unless those who live in what will be the new regional municipality recognize that we have acted in their best interests.

In the months ahead, we will continue to work diligently while reminding ourselves that the future best interests of those who live in these municipalities must be paramount in the decisions being made.

There's an element of growth and renewal about it. A sense of building something new together in, and for, the region itself. That concept is integral to the process and thinking. In this model, local autonomy and decision making carry the day and shape the future. Ultimately, everyone involved believes that local control will make all the difference as this exciting experiment in community building crosses the finish line in April 2020. [MW](#)

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