

# Nova Scotia restructuring facilitates economic growth, better services

## Lessons learned from a new model for consolidation



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Conventional wisdom holds that municipal consolidations facilitate economic growth and provide better services in a larger municipal unit. After the recent experience in Nova Scotia, we believe this to be true, but also recognize that securing the benefits will take both hard work and objective measurement.

More than three centuries after two Nova Scotia municipalities were founded, they became one on April 1, 2020. The Municipality of the District of West Hants and the Town of Windsor began their new unitary life 16 months after the Nova Scotia government passed special legislation to facilitate the friendly merger.

Looking back, it's clear that the consolidation process went well. The structure of the Coordinating Committee was well thought through and the goodwill of its members, and the communities they served, was constant.

### Strong Political and Administrative Leadership

We had two communities with strong political and administrative leadership that wanted to merge. The provincial legislation specific to this merger established a Coordinating Committee of five members, with two representatives from each municipality and me as the arms-length chair with the power to decide tie votes. That structure worked well. The committee established and met key milestones and achieved compromises where compromise was necessary.

I chaired the meetings of the Coordinating Committee, which included West Hants Warden Abraham Zebian and Deputy Warden Paul Morton;

Windsor Mayor Anna Allen and Deputy Mayor Laurie Murley; and the two chief administrative officers, Louis Coutinho of Windsor and Martin Laycock from West Hants. Held every two weeks, these meetings were open to the public and livestreamed via Facebook.

Working with strong support from the Nova Scotia Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, the committee created a work plan, determined what studies would need to be undertaken, and set deadlines for ourselves. The committee was committed to transparency, agreeing to publicly release all studies undertaken as part of the process, while recognizing that not every citizen of the two municipalities was equally persuaded about the merits of the merger.

The political and administrative leaders on the project were diligent in their participation. The committee actively sought and received helpful feedback through multiple media and in-person channels. And, under the legislation, it was given broad freedom to make local decisions around council size, administrative structure, and service delivery issues.

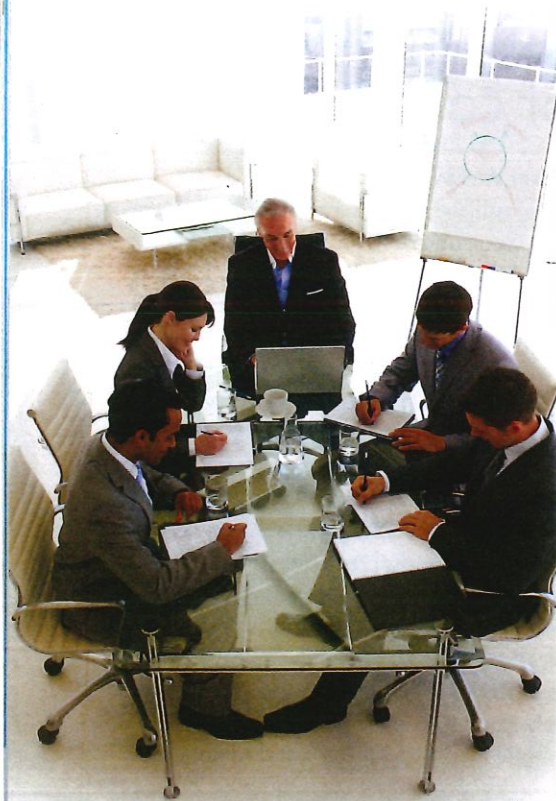
The result is a municipality with a strong administrative foundation – with a new CAO, Mark Phillips – and a refreshed council of 11 members plus a mayor that will function much more effectively for the combined region than would otherwise have been the case. It should be noted that the new

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**Municipal World Insider and Executive Members:** For insights into how this Nova Scotia merger came about, you can find Kevin Latimer's first article, "Nova Scotia restructuring offers new model for consolidation," in the research library on [municipalworld.com](http://municipalworld.com). Access it from inside your membership area! Just search for "Nova Scotia" or "consolidation."



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council includes three members of the Coordinating Committee who ran in the March 7 elections, including Warden Zebian, who was elected as mayor of the new regional municipality. On big issues like the merger, Mayor Zebian said, "This is proof that the residents trust and follow their elected officials."

## Multiple Perspectives on Success

From the perspective of an average citizen, there will be better coordination of core services like fire, police, planning, and recreation. The larger community will have the capacity to attract better talent and to procure larger scale goods and services through bulk purchasing at lower cost.

From the business community's perspective, there will be uniformity of rules and regulations, policies, and land use by-laws. A host of redundant licences, permits, and approvals will be eliminated.

From the perspective of the administration, there will be less duplication of effort, increased effectiveness, and more specialized talent. There will be consolidation of financial and accounting services, streamlined benefits and payroll processes, and elimination of numerous inter-municipal agreements.

From the perspective of employees, there will be more opportunities for training and growth in new areas of municipal administration. More options will be created for specialized talent and to work across a broader geographic area.

From the political perspective, there will be greater capacity to plan and build a municipality that is financially and administratively stronger, capable of striving for and delivering more to taxpayers without the aggravation of regional competition for investment that previously resulted in "winners and losers." The result should be consistent taxation and greater economic development in a stable political environment.

## Measuring Political, Administrative Wisdom

Whether all the anticipated benefits of the merger are achieved will depend on the wisdom of the new municipality's political and administrative leadership. In this case, they will be aided by work done by a team of graduate students from Dalhousie University who were engaged to identify performance metrics against which future judgements could be made about the success of the merger.

As part of the merger process, the committee recruited a multi-disciplinary team from the university's Management Without Borders program. Surprisingly for us, the students concluded after a literature search that very little work has been done in Canada to create clear metrics against which the presumed benefits of mergers could actually be measured. Beginning with a clean slate, the students undertook the task with a determination to create key performance indicators, including metrics around quality of life and citizen satisfaction.

The result of the students' work is a municipal benchmarking framework of more than 100 indicators that broadly includes governance; economics, finances and taxation; provision of services and infrastructure; administrative staff and structure; and sociocultural identity, demographics, and concerns of citizens. Through a workshop of Nova Scotia municipal thought leaders, the study list was narrowed to 11 key metrics that were endorsed by the Coordinating Committee for monitoring going forward. They include tracking GDP, population growth, and citizen satisfaction with services against historical performance of the two pre-existing units.

It's hard to know how these metrics will be used by future councils, but the Coordinating Committee is convinced that the Dalhousie students have created a framework that will be useful to the new municipality's self-assessment in years ahead. The metrics will help others answer the question of whether the merger delivered what had been promised. The study can also be used as the basis for frameworks in future consolidations elsewhere in Canada.

In the meantime, it will be important for the new municipality to establish an early focus on strong financial stewardship, notwithstanding the new municipality's larger budgets and greater geographic reach. It will be important for the new municipality to leverage the analysis reflected in the new municipality's asset registry, a registry that documents the need to plan for essential capital improvements not always visible to taxpayers. And it will be important that the new municipality functions such that it creates for itself a brand that's attractive to residents and investors.

**NOVA SCOTIA, cont'd on p. 44**



The tourism strategy also took into consideration the fact that, like much rural infrastructure in Nova Scotia and indeed in Canada, these sites need significant upgrades to attract visitors and ensure that they will last over time. Harbours have little or no directional signage, boardwalks along beaches need safety upgrades and dunes are suffering from erosion, trails lack parking and public washrooms, and more. It was therefore imperative that these challenges be accounted for when applying for funding to put into action the things the tourism strategy recommended. Beyond that, as many of these sites have local community groups and non-profits as owners and caretakers who largely rely on outside sources for funding and volunteers for everything else, the solutions to these challenges must be both creative and sustainable long-term.

In March 2020, the Government of Canada, the Province of Nova Scotia, and the Municipality of the County of Inverness announced a nearly \$1 million investment over three years so that the municipality can accomplish some of the recommendations prioritized by community groups and residents that were also present in the *Signature Spaces and Signage Strategy*. Repairs to the Cheticamp boardwalk, colourful percussion installations in thoughtful locations on The Great Trail, eco-friendly washrooms built in strategic communities along the Cabot Trail, a whale tail art installation at Pleasant Bay Harbour, community-shared infrastructure and streetscapes improvements in the villages of Whycocomagh and We'koqmaq First Nation are examples of just some of the projects moving forward.

This mix of fun and practical projects are consistent with the final outcomes as stated in the strategy: improving resident satisfaction as well as tourist satisfaction are given equal importance and consideration throughout the recommendations. Creating a better quality of life for the people of Inverness County, the ones who love and care for their home and who create the melodies that are so essential to the culture, is as crucial to the attraction and retention of newcomers as the signage that helps these visitors find their way – and in turn, make their own music. **MW**

Looking back, it is a tribute to the two municipal councils that this process was even initiated. Members of those councils, and their professional staffs, assessed the changing environment in which they operated and concluded that the two municipalities, located less than an hour's drive from Halifax, could better serve their residents as one. They believed they could achieve economies of scale which, in turn, would result in better services delivered more efficiently. Doing nothing, they concluded, would be the more risky option.

Councillor Rupert Jannasch, who represented a rural area of West Hants and served as an alternate on the Coordinating Committee, admitted he had doubts about the process and the result. But, he was a regular meeting attendee and gradually came to believe the process and outcome were worth the effort. "Being part of this process certainly opened my eyes to the potential of where we could take this," he said.

### Sustainable Community Future

As chair of the Coordinating Committee, I went into this exercise believing that friendly mergers like this are highly desirable. I've been a student of municipal government for more than 30 years and I am persuaded that issues like local identity and historic relationships can be accommodated in new more financially secure municipalities. I'm also confident that truly sustainable municipalities can attract the talent and build the systems to better serve citizens.

We think we achieved that with the merger of the Municipality of the District of West Hants and the Town of Windsor. The heritage of these two communities and the other distinct communities and neighbourhoods within the new municipality have not, in our view, been sacrificed to some "ivory tower" notion of efficiency.

Rather, through robust engagement that's only possible within a democracy, we have thoughtfully and transparently considered and debated key issues that affect the future of those who live and pay taxes in these communities.

Future analysts may well conclude that the Coordinating Committee made mistakes. But will these communities continue to evolve for the better because of the courage of the two councils to see a better future together? I'm certain that the answer is "Yes." **MW**

### Traffic Calming: Lower Speed, Lower Fatalities

In both the United States and Canada, SUVs and pick-up trucks are outselling all other types of vehicles, such as sedans. Due to the size and the height of the front of those vehicles, it comes as no surprise that SUVs are inherently more deadly if they strike a pedestrian. While a sedan would strike a pedestrian in the leg, or lower portion of the body, the higher front end of an SUV strikes a pedestrian in the upper torso. This is a difference between a broken leg and a crushed chest.

Calming traffic is more important now than ever. There are major cities around the country that are reducing the speed limits citywide between 30 km/h and 50 km/h to calm traffic, resulting in a reduced number of pedestrian, bicycle, and automobile fatalities.

It is worth noting, however, that reducing speed alone will not eliminate all automobile fatalities. But, it will create an environment where speed becomes less of a factor and those crossing a street or riding a bike will have a higher chance of survival if they are hit by a car.

Traffic engineers have discovered that while speed bumps, chicanes, and other traffic calming measures have had success, they are not the end-all. Experience shows that roundabouts, which force vehicles to slow down, and universal speed reductions are the two best traffic calming measures. Universal speed reductions require enforcement, but that enforcement can be aided by dynamic message signs that advise motorists how fast they are actually driving versus the posted speed limit. This is not meant to be a speed enforcement device. Rather, it is meant to be a reminder that they are driving above a safe speed or traveling above the speed for which the road has been posted.

### Long, Winding Road to Vision Zero

While there is still work to be done to achieve Vision Zero goals, there are countless and effective programs, such as Complete Streets, underway throughout Canada. Keep in mind, achieving this goal nationwide requires commitment and change from all Canadians. It's a long, winding road to reach the destination, but it's certainly worth it in the long run. **MW**