

Reference No. 2021-015

July 21, 2021

Honorable Minister Daniel Allain
Department of Environment and Local Government
Marysville Place
20 McGloin Street
Fredericton, New Brunswick
E3A 5T8

Re: Town of Sackville Response to Local Governance Reform Green Paper

Minister Allain,

Thank you for meeting with members of Town Council and staff back in February on the local government reform process. We appreciated the opportunity to speak with you about the objectives of the reform process and provide input on behalf of the Town of Sackville from the traditional, unceded lands and waters of the Mi'kmaq. Since February, we have also reviewed the Green Paper, *Working together for vibrant and sustainable communities*, released by your office in April and two of our staff are participating in the Land Use and Finance working groups.

Sackville is a new kind of small town. We have a hospital, we are home to Mount Allison University, which is regularly recognized as the number one primary undergraduate university in Canada, we have an abundance of cultural attributes such as museums, galleries and artists, and innovative employers in the industrial sector. We are a hub for the surrounding region and residents, who visit Sackville for groceries, banking, medical appointments, and access to government services such as the Post Office, Service New Brunswick and the Southeast Regional Service Commission.

The Town of Sackville respectfully submits the following observations and recommendations for you to consider as part of the local governance reform process:

Structure

- The governance structure of unincorporated areas is presented as a major problem in the Green Paper. We strongly agree with this position and would suggest that some

form of regional government be explored so that local representation can be established within these currently unincorporated areas. At the present time, we have no structure to collaborate with on projects or other investments that serve a regional benefit.

- A successful model that has a proven track record is the county council used in Nova Scotia. It has been in place for some time and would provide a template for New Brunswick. This model would allow incorporated municipalities such as Sackville to deal with an equivalent government on any form of shared services.
- Sackville does not feel amalgamation is a realistic solution and would object to any forced amalgamation.

Regional Collaboration

- When it comes to some services such as fire, police and public works, regional collaboration does not always work. Sackville already has mutual aid agreements in place for fire services with surrounding communities. The funding for Fire Services to the Local Service Districts under the current system is inadequate and underfunded by approximately 30%. If fire services were regional, Sackville has \$8,730,000 million of equipment that citizens of the Town of Sackville have paid for. For police services, the regional model currently in place seems to work well from an operational perspective but causes issues with the administration our Municipal Police Service Agreement at other times. For water and sewer, a regional system would be cost prohibitive as approximately one third of our residents are currently unserved.
- Recreation is one area where regional collaboration may work. There are already some efforts in place for regional recreation infrastructure such as trails. Regional collaboration could be beneficial if there is a fair financial model in place where all users contribute equally. Currently, a significant portion of recreation facility users are from outside Sackville. For example, approximately 40% of our rink users are not Sackville residents. Meanwhile, the Tantramar Veterans Memorial Civic Centre has an annual operations loss of \$300,000 all of which is paid for by residents of the Town of Sackville.

We also see a potential for regional collaboration on areas such as immigration, tourism and economic development. These topics are best approached through a regional or provincial lens, particularly given the expertise, resources and overall strategy needed to succeed.

Land Use Planning

- New Brunswick needs a provincial planning framework that addresses the most important issue facing our province, climate change. How we plan for climate change will impact other issues such as urban sprawl, coastal development, floodplains, health and built environment, infrastructure investments and transportation planning, resource developments and agriculture. All of these areas have a provincial interest.
- We recommend that there be better collaboration, coordination and communication between local and regional governments on land-use decisions that affect things at a regional level, particularly with respect to large infrastructure investment such as school, hospitals, transportation projects and others.

Finance

- The local governance reform process needs to address the imbalances in finance and taxation. In recent years, Sackville has lost several important sources of income, most recently the provincial fine sharing. In addition, we take issue with the non-owner-occupied property tax system, commonly referred to as the double tax. At the present time, none of this money stays in the community and results in a significant dollar value leaving Sackville.
- We strongly feel that equalization grants are complicated and unfairly applied. For example, the Mount Allison student population is not counted in our equalization formula, yet many students choose to reside in our community throughout their university career. Furthermore, we must provide essential services to the student body throughout their time in Sackville. At the same time, provincial buildings such as the Mount Allison campus are underassessed but are included in the equalization calculation. Sackville feels that both the student population and the provincial assessments should be included in the equalization formula, or both should be excluded from the formula to make it more equitable.

As part of the reform process, we encourage you to explore a fair property tax system in New Brunswick. It is well understood that many people live just outside municipal boundaries because of lower tax rates, but still utilize a variety of municipal services without paying their fair share. The current system is inequitable and creates a financial hardship for municipalities.

Other Observations:

- We strongly recommend that the Province consider the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action* as they move forward with Local Governance Reform.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we agree that there is room for improvement in our current local governance model. Solutions need to be fair, especially in terms of financing, and should also be reflective of the municipality as there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

I want to thank you for the opportunity to participate in the local governance reform process. Without question, this is a challenging undertaking, but it presents extraordinary opportunities for our province. Please know that our municipality is here to work with you and to help you as you embark on this important process.

Sincerely,



Shawn Mesheau
Mayor

Cc: Sackville Town Council
Jamie Burke, CAO
Michael Beal, Treasurer
Kieran Miller, Senior Manager of Corporate Projects