

MEMRAMCOOK-TANTRAMAR COMMUNITY TASK FORCE

News Release

Date: November 8, 2022

From: Memramcook-Tantramar Community Task Force

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Revitalizing Health Care In Tantramar

“The future of rural health care is one of the most important issues in the upcoming election for the first council of the new Town of Tantramar.”

John Higham, co-chair of the Rural Health Action Group, presented this message to a meeting of Sackville Town Council on Tuesday night.

The Action Group was formed last year in response to the announcement by Horizon Health Network, in June 2021, that Emergency Room Service at the Sackville Memorial Hospital would be severely curtailed until further notice.

“What we discovered,” said John Higham, “was that this closure was not an arbitrary act by Horizon, but rather the continuation of a decline of structure and local accountability that had been ongoing since the 1990s, when local governance of the hospital was replaced by regional, and later province-wide management structures.”

“The good news,” he continued, “is that, thanks to constructive collaboration between Horizon and our local working committee, revitalization of that structure is well under way. Many of the underlying conditions that led to the cutback in emergency service are being addressed.”

The numbers tell a positive story. Horizon has hired a total of five nurses for the Emergency Department, including two in full-time positions and three in permanent part-time. In addition, five casual Nurse Practitioners are now working as part of the emergency care team and recruitment efforts continue.

At present, only three local physicians are covering the Emergency Department, with the result that the hours of operation are still limited to 8:00 am to 4:00 pm daily. However, a vigorous community recruitment initiative, including digital and in-person events, has been complemented by Horizon’s own efforts and its support of local digital initiatives. A recent recruitment event for physicians resulted in at least twelve direct expressions of interest, and these are being followed up diligently.

“Not least among the benefits of community engagement in the recruitment drive is the way we speak to the personal interest of job-seekers” stated John Higham. “People aren’t just interested in professional opportunity. They’re also looking for an attractive community in which to live. And that’s something we can offer.”

Close to 50% of New Brunswickers live in rural and small town settings. The process of revitalizing the Sackville Memorial Hospital has allowed health professionals to see the important role of smaller hospitals as integral parts of the provincial health care system — not merely as points of intake, but as locations for a wide variety of medical services, including day surgery and some types of acute care.

“Not only will this approach ensure that more New Brunswickers can access vital care closer to home,” said Higham. “We believe its underlying commitment to improving health outcomes will also save the Province vast sums of money.”