



## **REQUEST FOR DECISION/DIRECTION**

**REPORT TO:** Policy & Strategy Committee

**SUBMITTED BY:** Sarah Kucharski, Communications Officer,

**DATE:** September 19, 2017

**RE:** Rural School Closures

**ORIGIN:** Council motion from May 23, 2017

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### **RECOMMENDATION**

**“Move that the committee direct staff to further investigate the potential actions as discussed.”**

### **BACKGROUND**

Staff brought a report to Council on May 23, 2017 that outlined the issues facing our residents concerning rural school closures. The following motion was carried unanimously: Staff are directed to work toward a meeting that involves all relevant participants in the issue of potential school closures within our Municipality, with special attention to the schools slated for closure; and further, that the meeting be held at a local school if available.

The **2017 Rural Schools Community Meetings Engagement Report**, which outlines the public engagement efforts staff took, is attached to this memo.

### **ACTIONS IDENTIFIED BY RESIDENTS**

Several action items were suggested by residents during the engagement process. Staff have identified common suggestions that could potentially be pursued by The Municipality, should Council wish to take further action on the issue of rural school closures. This is not an exhaustive list, and event attendees did not prioritize or vote on potential actions. The list is not in any particular order, but numbered only for ease of discussion. For the complete list of suggestions made during the meetings, please see the attached report.

### Common Suggestions for Municipal Action

1. The Municipality should raise the issue with the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities.
2. The Municipality should invest in additional economic development activity in specific communities.
3. The Municipality should advocate with the Department of Education to permit the Municipality a seat on the School Board.
4. The Municipality should staff resources to gather information for Parent Advisory Councils to use in the School Review process.
5. The Municipality should co-locate shared services at school locations.

In addition to these suggestions for addressing rural school closure in general, there was specific comment provided related to the closures of Pentz & Petite Riviere:

6. The Municipality should formally request a meeting with the Education Minister to advocate for a reversal of the decision to close these schools

### **DISCUSSION**

The above list represents more common suggestions made by community members, but is not an exhaustive list. In addition to the information in the attached engagement report, Committee members also have developed expertise and a unique perspective by serving as Councillors, and there are some additional steps required before finalizing a municipal approach to addressing rural school closures. Staff propose the following outline for the Municipality to follow to develop MODL's approach:

- At its September 19<sup>th</sup> meeting, PSC should discuss the information provided through the engagement work and put forward any other actions that committee members believe would be effective in supporting rural schools.
- Also at the September 19<sup>th</sup> meeting, PSC should identify which options merit further investigation.
- September 2017 to January 2018 – Staff complete research into the potential actions selected by Council to determine costs, staff effort, the intended goal, and potential for effectiveness.
- January 2018 – Staff report to Council. Council selects which actions to proceed with.

### **WORK PROGRAM IMPLICATIONS**

Depending on the actions selected, the research may require significant staff time from the Communications Officer, Deputy CAO and Economic Development Officer. This has not been incorporated into their workplans.

# 2017 Rural Schools Community Meetings Engagement Report

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## Introduction

Staff brought a report to Council on May 23, 2017 that outlined the issues facing our residents concerning rural school closures. The following motion was carried unanimously: Staff are directed to work toward a meeting that involves all relevant participants in the issue of potential school closures within our Municipality, with special attention to the schools slated for closure; and further, that the meeting be held at a local school if available.

This report provides a summary of the community engagement process and results.

## Engagement purpose

The engagement strategy was designed to involve the public in the municipal decision-making process. The municipality was seeking resident input to inform Council’s approach to the issue of rural school viability and closures. Community groups were invited to speak, only one representative registered, the Greater Petite Area Community Association (GPACA).

## Approach

The Municipality held two meetings, the first at the LaHave Fire Hall on Wednesday, July 19 and the second at the Northfield Fire Hall on Monday, July 24. Each event was held from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. and followed the same process. At each of the meetings, attendees heard a short presentation from the Municipality and one from GPACA. They then worked in small groups to discuss the following question:

*“How can the Municipality of the District of Lunenburg support communities facing school closures?”*

After a half hour of discussion, the groups presented their top ideas to the room at large. Table discussion notes were recorded by table scribes, and each table had a Councillor seated at the table.

### Advertising and media

A variety of methods were used to advertise the opportunities to provide input. The Municipality distributed a media release, placed advertisements in local newspapers and radio, added content to the modl.ca website and invited community advocacy groups.

### Budget

Advertising (one ad in each newspaper for two weeks, six days of radio ads)	\$1,858.37
Hall rental	\$180
Refreshments	\$155
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$2,193.37</b>

### Engagement results

Approximately 40 members of the public attended the LaHave event. In addition, a further 15 staff and Council members attended as table leaders and scribes. One member of the South Shore Regional School Board attended the event.

Approximately 15 members of the public attended the Northfield event. In addition, a further 5 staff and 9 Council members attended as table leaders and scribes. Three members of the South Shore Regional School Board attended the event.

Common themes that emerged from the discussions are as follows.

- Attendees echoed the concerns identified by the Municipality – that the closures of rural schools have a negative effect on the social-economic viability of the community.
- There’s a lack of understanding in the community about the long-term vision for education in the province, and how the school board sets and communicates their goals.
- The Municipality should take a more active role in advocating on behalf of communities facing School Reviews. Suggestions included:
  - reaching out formally to the Education Minister
  - insisting that MODL have a seat on the School Board, investing in additional economic development activity in specific communities
  - directing staff resources to gather information for Parent Advisory Councils to use in the School Review process.
- Residents would like to see the Municipality support efforts to co-locate or encourage shared services at school locations.
- Residents welcomed this form of open dialogue and appreciated the opportunity to discuss the issue with Council members.

### Opportunity for improvement

Future events would benefit from the use of easels for note-taking, and name tags for all attendees to improve the ease of individual collaboration. Large groups should be split to ensure no more than eight people were at a table.

### Next steps

Further discussion at a Policy and Strategy Committee meeting should be undertaken to develop a common strategic approach based on citizen input for the municipality when faced with a school review or rural school closure.

## Appendix A: Comments

### Rural Schools Community Meetings

LaHave – July 19, 2017

Table 1

- What does MODL want to do?
  - We want to know how we can support!
- Does MODL have money to help case?
  - We are already doing intervention
  - Sitting beside GPACA
- Why do schools close? Enrollment? Overall reason? Money? No direction from board?
  - MODL to find answer
- MODL to help find out why.
  - All we're told is we can't change decision.
- Super schools seems to be what they want.
  - Has more issues.
    - Lose achievement, sense of community, self worth, less resources, no community kitchen, reading, etc.
- Split between Education & Municipalities
- Money we pay, should have more say/control
- MODL needs to be forceful in helping
- Seems SSRSB backed themselves in corner
- Procedures need to be in place to override bad judgement/decisions
- How does SSRSB come up with utilization of building?
- These buildings are vital in community!!!
- MODL should make SSRSB aware of the vital usable space (i.e. reading rooms/kitchen/sensory rooms)
- Left to legal system to sort out – Wrong
- We have no control over legal system – Unsatisfactory
- MODL should support SSRSB in changing mind
- Look at past schools – Centre/Riverport
  - This is what we have/ not good in community
- Still cost money whether open/close
- Big impact for closures
- What happens if Petite = open, Pentz = closed
- Shared space = big point – Emphasize this MODL to help promote
- What is MODL doing now?
  - Internet, business, Economic Development, tie it in to overall
- When review is done they don't include usable space versus classroom space

- Kitchen – resources
- Formula for class max doesn't always add up

**Table 2**

- Schools closing cost MODL a lot of \$
- Why/how was decision made to close Pentz Elementary
- What school is next?
- Do not save \$ by closing schools
- Why were Petite and Pentz chosen?
  - School Review Committee
  - Declining population of students
  - Cost of maintaining old buildings
  - "Space utilization formula"
- Tone of SSRSB was not "glad" to close
- There are two schools closing, not just 1
- Suggestion: Can Council ask Minister to stop school closure process until other options are investigated
- NOW! Minister of Education are only stopping closure of schools in the process
- Need new models for small elementary schools in rural NS
- Early child development initiative – co-locating services
  - Threatened closure of 2 schools
  - What is the policy of the province
  - How do you get sense of urgency heard by the province? What is the ambition of the province & to be a leader
- Need a long-term vision!
- How do system interact – all public buildings
- Closing schools but pay 100s of 1000s to rent SSRSB office
- Systems & models have to change – demand change
- Suggestion: short/long term
  - What is the province's vision?
  - MODL – short – contact Minister of Education to stop closure NOW!
  - MODL – long promote new models and systems
- Chapman's purchased a school deemed to be closed (CBC radio) province still said no!
- Smaller schools have better programs

**Table 3**

- School board not doing what they should be doing.
  - Elected but not representing constituents
  - Acclaimed school board members – community thought they were getting a new school
- MODL legislated to pay school board
- We should not take the schools back – MODL
- MODL – take a firm stand in support of school staying open

- Facts may be wrong – Petite is growing – businesses moving in, children moving in – population is growing – School board does not have the correct facts (may be old data) – out of touch with community. Board does not listen – doesn't respond to community requests. c/o Realtors for STATS!
- Hidden agenda (?) Who's operating the puppets? The School Board are the "puppets" construction lobby group for new school in Hebbville?
- Who benefits from closing the school? Not taxpayer
- Can MODL ask to have the School Board fired?
- Province not taking responsibility for School Board
- Outreach for home schoolers to get them to come to Petite?
- Children from home schools (Waldorf), Alternative School have tried Petite and have flourished
- Can we participate in bid process for new schools?
  - Can MODL be part of that process? Hebbville is putting tenders out – can MODL have access to that bid? (construction)
- C@P site – Petite School – Intranet Access like Digby Neck
- MODL liase with Province NS to get School Board to act

#### **Table 4**

Advocacy – shared space, speaking out

- a. Speaking out about school closures re: impact to municipal residents (for + and – outcomes)
- b. Health, economic, equity (education, ASP, etc.)
- c. Being an advocate for "hubs"/shared space model

Accountability – cost, legal briefing, how tax \$s are spent

- a. Making sure that tax dollars tagged for education and spent (in part) in the best interest of all members of the Municipality (again, ensure equity) - accountability framework

Action – legal action this summer, finding of fact

- a. Taking direct action for positive action (facilitating change management or supporting communities to retain their small schools) i.e. "intervener" in Judicial Review, fact finding (evidence to support health, economy)
- b. Raising as a provincial issue with Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities (create a road map for all municipalities across the province)

1. Council compile Cost & Issues - Demolish buildings

- (it was believed it was conditional closure – misled)
- Believes improper motives – people were kept away from running for School Board, then they found out about closure
- Create a solid document for fact finding

2. What is available in terms of data – breakdown of community statistics – age of community

- What does it mean for the Municipality - real estate, population

- New birth – current students, projected enrollment
  - Province may have vital statistics
3. GPACA has limited funds, perhaps MODL could help gather this information
  4. Affects larger community – not just parents of children attending school.
    - Need MODL to engage business community and continue to voice concern by Mayor & MODL
  5. Businesses already have a difficult time to find employees
    - Businesses want as many locals to represent
  6. Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities -is there a road map – infrastructure like schools
    - This is a NS issue, not just a Lunenburg County issue
    - Maybe stronger to join other Municipalities
  7. Need a common briefing (see #1)
  8. Money going to cleaning LaHave River and other items
  9. Pentz and Petite central to tourist community. Tourists come on vacation and some decide to move here
  10. Decisions like these destroy families
  11. Broadband must be fixed for the future of the community
  12. Unsure how Municipalities get involved
    - Need more voices – advocacy
  13. What % of taxes go to Education – 7 million of 30 million
    - Pie chart on your tax bill
  14. (MODL) Can all municipalities insist on how the education \$s are used
    - Arguments on how the money is spent
  15. Closing schools is detrimental to municipalities
    - Why not amalgamate everything
  16. Should be more decentralized – should be a vested interest in small communities.
  17. Surprised MODL doesn't have a policy
  18. Share spaces/shared services
  19. % of used space – can it be rented out partially to increase the %
    - Can MODL use some school space?

## Table 5

- Concerns Pentz school closure not discussed in opening comments
- Pentz also at school board meetings, no success
- Schools can be converted to MODL assets/parks
- Some closed schools became another community centre to bring people together
- Council to be more responsive to constituents of the area
- Council can challenge the school boards where they have lost contact with the people they represent
- Can MODL be more proactive and not reactive
- Why does the Municipality not have more legal status or control on decisions
- Why can province halt school closure reviews in Cole Harbour but not in any other jurisdiction
- Why are hub school standards different across NS
- Request a meeting of all MODL, provincial and school boards together to meet & discuss issues – why so many different legal opinions exist across NS & why current process is flawed
- NS Government cutting budgets – to the area school boards
- Need to be proactive to upkeep and upgrade to allow the school to operate for a longer life (5 – 10 years)
- Long bus trips to schools that remain open for young children
- Have a school in a central location so communities can keep schools and local students in them
- Don't want to see the two schools fight amongst themselves
- School doesn't have control of their budget, it is dictated to them
- Province created the school closure process and say new schools would be built, then continually change the rules/process

## Feedback from comment cards

- Advocacy – we need MODL to be vocal and keep this issue in the news/media
- MODL should engage businesses as stakeholders
- MODL should look at ways to contribute to “share space” – help us use our schools!
- The meeting could and should have been focused on a finding of fact/legal brief to be made ready for September 7, not longer-term issues we can just as easily and effectively discuss this fall
- Why are our tax dollars going to something the majority does not agree on?
- Meet with Department of Education, School Board & Premier to find out “who is in control?”
- Be bold in asking for new model system
- At our table I think that, perhaps, one important point did not come across very well. We suggested 1) The Municipality should ask the Minister of Education to overturn closure decision NOW 2) The other half of this was that the province should be asked to develop a long-term vision for NS including rural communities (rural schools) 3) The Municipality should boldly (bravely) insist that current models of school assessment and decision making be revamped since the current ones are not working.

- More education to general public about school closures and how they affect the community as a whole

### Northfield– July 24, 2017

#### Table 1

- How do we untie our hands to be able to do something? Concern: hands are tied.
- Once School Board makes a decision there is nothing that can be done.
- More clarity on School Board meetings
- Attend meetings on behalf of residents/hold a seat on the board
- Intervene earlier before decisions are made (i.e. catchment area)
- Liase with School Board to find their intentions
- Transparency to know plan
- Communications Officer liase with School Board’s Communications Officer
- Add School Board section to Municipal Matters
- Engage in Review of School Board Administration (municipalities)
- Look at Greenfield model (school, library, fitness) (to copy for Petite/or other)
- Publicly be a model with School Board to develop relationships with province/parents/school boards
- Work with and make work
- Collaborate – member of Council on Board
- Do we need a board?

#### Table 2

- MODL should have a model of what is needed to keep the schools from closing
- Have a plan for basic needs – all education and other community necessities
- Find a way to maintain a smaller school
  - Schools started small
- Schools could become multi-use, more purposes
- Small business / Farmers markets as part of school
- If MODL puts in that much funding, perhaps MODL should have a rep on the school board
- Or a Task Force by MODL to be engaged with School Board
- Municipalities/UNSM have to start talking to Province to make decisions with the School Boards and the things money is being spent on
- School board needs partners – everything is dictated to the members
- Apply pressure to the Province
- School Board is trying to protect/cuts coming from Province
- Small scale schools do really well i.e. Waldorf School, use this as a model
- Get away with the costs of larger schools could use smaller schools as a scale to measure
- Lunenburg County independent school – a great model to look at
- Question the status quo that is given to the School Board by the Province.

#### Table 3

- Advocates to change at provincial level
- Redefine what a Rural Nova Scotia community school is (new model)
- Accountability for tax dollars – same \$\$ whether open or closed
- MODL has voice within the SSRSB
- Meeting with the SSRSB
- Act needs to be changed to allow MODL to be involved
- MODL help communities to showcase themselves
- MODL help support communities/groups
- Change act to have MODL involved
- Bus route – transportation
- Can MODL lobby provincial government
- What do we get for our 8 million?
- Quality education versus quantity
- Co-location of services and shared space

### **Supplementary feedback**

1. Develop a mission statement (vision) or what our community needs to support large to small schools
  - i.e. Hub school
  - Waldorf style/size
  - Small/medium/large
  - Established alternatives elsewhere (Europe/outdoor/forest schools)
  - Also includes food supply
  - Butchers
  - Social uses
  - Elderly
  - Making the school an integral part of rural life for all (not just permits)
  - Take input for community
2. Help establishing communication between SSRSB, Parent/Community/MODL to the province
3. Be willing to question school model

### **Feedback submitted online:**

- We need to look beyond the fiscal issues and bureaucracy of funding a huge management regime of overseeing PAID school boards. Communities need to be able to decide how resources are spent and they should emphasize community development. I have lived here for 22 years and the influx of young families to the area because of the schools is very apparent. Us old folks prosper from it as well. I remember my mother was on a school board and it was volunteer. Our health care system now has taken the community out and look at the results, a new level and huge administrative overhead.

- I missed the West Northfield meeting last night which I planned to attend. Last minute, being late leaving work, it didn't happen. I thought I'd do the survey today, but after completing it, it tells me that it has expired. My biggest concern if I'm allowed to voice it here is that if West Northfield Elementary is closed (and I pray every day that it is not!)....that they will split/divide the school population and send the kids to various schools. Please, please consider keeping all the kids/school families together if they must relocate schools. Don't send them to separate schools. My kids have cried themselves to sleep many nights after hearing people speak of their school closing. To have them also go to a new school, separated from their classmates is not acceptable. These rural schools are like family, and the atmosphere in them is such. You cannot replace that in the proposed super schools. I honestly believe the small schools are best for young children especially. In super schools, they become a number only, with no one really noticing them, or the needs they may have. I could go on & on about how upset I am to hear of a possible school closure, especially after specifically living where to do to have our children attend West Northfield elementary, but my biggest fear of all is that if they close, they will divide the kids. Please keep them all together if they must move to a different school. Thank you for listening to my concerns.
- I realize that you might have read the attached opinion piece from the Chronicle Herald but thought I should send it to you as it reflects my feelings on this topic so well. I'm particularly disturbed that the SSRSB has chosen to ignore the wealth of energy and good ideas from the community that would make the area healthy and prosperous instead of dividing communities and wasting millions of dollars on conflict. Thank you for your time and particularly your efforts in holding the public input meetings this week.

#### **Feedback submitted through feedback forms at events:**

##### **What did you like most about this event?**

- Free exchange of ideas.
- Opportunity to discuss an important issue.
- enthusiastic support from MODL, interesting ideas.
- Everyone got a chance to speak.
- The fact that it's happening at all. Also, lots of councillors here.
- Open forum between public and municipality.
- Community engagement/break out groups.
- Staff at each table and Councillors.
- Listening driven, not speeches.
- Being consulted. Thank you for asking community first. "Nothing about us, without us."
- Hearing the community connection. Everyone is on the same page. Lots of different approaches to the goal.
- Many excellent support suggestions.
- Opportunity to have direct input for the Mayor and Council.
- The ability to express our ideas.
- Open dialogue.
- Wide variety of opinion in discussion group. Moved along at a good clip.
- Good discussion, great cookies.

- The open table discussions.
- Nice to have MODL engaged. Please stay neutral.
- Chance to discuss issues around schools.
- I appreciate the collaboration between Council/community.
- I had a voice.
- Collaboration between all tables.
- That our voices were requested, heard and will be considered.
- The opportunity to voice my issues.
- A chance to be heard

**What did you like least about this event?**

- Noisy.
- It's always hard to keep a group discussion focused.
- Two breakout periods with less introduction. Name tags. Could have allowed each group to focus on the best ideas of any group.
- Not everyone has the opportunity to voice their thoughts - group discussion challenges.
- Pentz doesn't seem to be included as much, don't know why?
- Focus on one particular school at the start of the meeting.
- 6:30pm too early.
- Vice chair's scolding us.
- The School Board Vice-Chair taking the mic at the end.
- When the arguing got heated it felt uncomfortable (thanks to facilitator for keeping the flames low).

**Do you have any other comments or suggestions?**

- Keep up the good work.
- Why wasn't the attorney present? The meeting could and should have focused on a finding of fact/legal brief to be made ready for September 7, not longer term issues we can just as easily and effectively discuss this fall.
- Why are our tax dollars going to something the majority does not agree on?
- Meet with Department of Education, School board and Premier to find out Who is in control?
- I really like the whole idea of meetings like this. Maybe suggestions for meeting participants on how they could follow up with individuals or as part of a council initiative. Thank you for the information and the opportunity to take part.
- Be bold in asking for new model system.
- Please keep offering public opportunities to provide input.