

July 5, 2007 Public meeting, Mahone Bay

Block 1

Presentations on the value of the woods, wetlands and soccer field.

Block 2

Presentation by Mayor Joe Feeney on the financial and demographic challenges the town is facing.

Block 3

[Ground rules: Take a number. 3 minutes to speak. Listen respectfully and speak respectfully. Not debate or discussion tonight. Not to resolve anything. Use "we" only if speaking for a group, otherwise use "I". Recorded by video, note taking and flipcharts.]

Dave Thoms, President of Mahone Bay Soccer Association

It is possible to have both development and a strong recreational structure.

- There are alternative public lands in town that haven't been offered to developers.
- We request that the town develop the soccer field as a multi purpose playing field.
- We would like to see woodlands held as public.
- We are prepared to make a proposal...
- There are 3 acres on Hawthorne Hill.
- Consider these other areas before going forward.

Bob Sayer

I think there is an obligation on people opposed to the proposed development to come up with an alternative. I only hope they'll be listened to.

I'm a CFA. 35 years.

I'm amazed at how small a community we are. Our tax base is tiny.

It worries me that the proposal is being made is a band-aid. What if we did this and in 5 years we still had the same problem of not being viable financially?

- Possibility of amalgamation with Municipality of Lunenburg or of Chester: Take the example of Liverpool. In 1996 it amalgamated with the municipality. But first it appointed a 2-person impartial committee of respected citizens who did the books and came up with a recommendation. At first the majority of town councillors were against it, as ours would be. But they voted unanimously for it when the facts were presented. There were considerable cost savings. Residential and commercial tax rate is now lower than in 1996. Garbage collection fee scrapped. The special commercial rate for business development was scrapped. Policing improved. Liverpool has been able to eliminate its \$400,000 debt on the town water utility. And now they're going to add a new water project to the town.

- This town has never done an objective, impartial study on amalgamation. We have people with opinions, but not based on facts. We need to do this.

David Etter

I've raised this question of amalgamation to councillors, but they have a vitriolic emotional reaction against it.

Derwin Spencer. Recent CFA. 64 Maple St.

Being new here, I've been exploring all of Mahone Bay and thinking of ways to develop the town as a tourist destination. Once you've seen Main St. and the churches, and if you're not a shopper, what do you do? I congratulate those who work on the festivals. But we have other unrecognized resources that we are not promoting, not advertising.

- Waterfront could be developed for walking, more park benches and picnic tables
- Have more information signboards around: about the churches, other historical buildings, as Lunenburg does, particularly along Main St.
- Have more opportunities for people to get on the water – boat tours.
- Walking trails – they're hidden away – they should be promoted more.
- Mahone Bay Centre should be better advertised to draw people in from the county and farther to take courses available there.
- Promote ourselves to bus tours more – and give them more reason to stay a while and walk the streets and shop.
- Generally we need to sell the town better; put some resources into it.

Barb Hayley. 2 year resident living on School St.

Recognized town planners Dover, Kohl and Partners (<http://www.doverkohl.com/>) say that poor planning causes people to lose confidence – it turns a NIMBY attitude into an attitude of resisting any kind of change anywhere. We need growth. The key is to have a master plan. Take into consideration what is valuable in the community. For example, the planners mentioned worked with a small town, Port Royal SC, population 4,000. Townspeople and councillors worked together to identify key private properties that could be developed, existing roads and rights of way that could be improved, how significant public spaces, open spaces, and public buildings could work together for preservation and conservation. Developers and planners do not always work in sync.

- We should work together with planning and architectural schools, develop a master plan, see how we can develop resources better.
- We have a gem, let's develop our gem.
- Also should check out amalgamation.

Scott Cadillac. Just moved here from Calgary with wife and 3 kids.

We sold our house in Calgary and drove here without coming in advance to find a place to live. We arrived in NS 2 months ago and decided to go town shopping. We had a defined list of criteria:

- no big box stores,
- not overrun with commercialism,
- character and culture,

- safe for kids,
- lots of green space,
- access to shopping and nature within walking distance of the house.

Mahone Bay met all these criteria. We took possession of our house on May 18. We felt we were the luckiest people in the world. We were willing to pay more for the house than we might have elsewhere; it was well worth it. The day after we moved in, we found out about this development. I came to think that maybe I made the worst decision of my life. I don't pretend to know the alternatives, the politics, etc., but I will do what it takes.

Penny Carver

Lived in Lunenburg Co. for 11 years and Mahone Bay for 3.

I want to talk about the example of the little town of Craik, Saskatchewan, pop. 400, which had lost its grain elevator but found a creative way of dealing with its challenges. Working in partnership with other towns in the area, it studied its possibilities and decided to pursue a sustainable living project. Town Council was forward-looking. Now there's an eco-village with economical building lots for green houses, an outreach centre, community action such as the 1-tonne challenge contest. Over the last 5 years, Craik, has turned around. 47 new families have moved in and there are new green industries, a chemical free golf course and lots more. See handout. There is funding available for sustainable development – matching the human needs of today without compromising future generations. Sustainability requires a balancing and meshing of economic, social and environmental factors, not the promotion of one at the expense of the others.

Alleson Kase

See blue handout. [Some points below are taken from the handout.] I came to NS to do a degree in international development and stayed. I feel fortunate to live in Mahone Bay.

Successful community development builds on existing resources, not trading one for another. We can build on what we have while increasing sustainability of the town. To do this, we have to do a careful study. A study of real estate trends in Canada done by Scotia Economics –

http://www.scotiacapital.com/English/bns_econ/retrends.pdf – predicts where increases will occur in the future based on demographic and other data. Mr. Youden's development looks like it wouldn't work because of sluggish markets in the areas and age groups concerned. First time buyers will grow very slowly; they go for entry level homes in urban centres close to employment opportunities. It shows the importance of looking at statistics. The main increase is for seniors' housing where people are moving up in quality and down in size.

- I've contacted an architecture professor at Dal who would be happy to place a senior grad student in Mahone Bay in the fall to show us what a real good town plan would look like.
- Have a variety of solutions to reflect diversity of housing
- Develop new residential units for the most likely market
- Spread units over several locations
- Preserve current resources while developing new ones
- Focus development on lands that would benefit from renewal

- Seniors' units should be in areas that provide safe and easy access (flat terrain within walking distance of amenities)
- Explore creative financing ideas

Jim Wentzell

I've been involved with town budgets for the last 10 years in Mahone Bay. I worked for all 3 towns. Did a study on recreation facilities a few years ago. My views are a little different. I agree that we need a good balance between development and what exists. Some of these proposals have looked at that. I grew up in Bridgewater but have worked for all the towns, the County and Queens Municipality. Of all of them, Mahone Bay is the best place to live. It's the one place where you can park your car in one spot and walk the whole town. I can walk to work. I feel fortunate with the council I work for. I'm a glass-half-full kind of guy, and they are positive too.

There are 5 issues that are critical to this town.

- Safe drinking water. Canadian standards have changed. It's costing \$3.5 million for improved water.
- Affordable housing and population decline. To me that is key to the survival to any town. When I looked to buy a house there was only one I could afford. I'm the only town employee who owns a house in the town. Businesses too – ask their employees who can afford to live in the town. More residents are needed to run the festivals, the Mahone Bay Centre, the fire department.
- Economic growth and improved business climate. Businesses here operate on a tight margin. We need more year-round residents and it might attract more services.
- Seniors housing and assisted living for aging population. There are 71 seniors living alone in their own house now, there are 77 that are over 55 living with family [??? not sure I got this]. This is a great need.
- Stabilized tax, electrical and water rates.

This is the not the only patch of woods in town, and there are alternatives to this particular soccer field.

The amalgamation question should be studied in detail. However it wouldn't solve the issues of affordable housing, seniors' housing, assisted living nor economic stability for businesses.

Keith Macdonald

I have been in Mahone Bay for 23 years. I've worked in finance in Halifax. I have to thank Council for bringing a clean harbour to Mahone Bay, and they are working to bring clean drinking water. It's not easy. But we have to look at the numbers, and be fair and reasonable. Unfortunately the mailout has mistakes in it.

The stated decline in population by 27.5% should be 11%. And we're not alone. Most towns in NS are in decline.

It says we pay the highest per capita tax. This is a misrepresentation of the facts. We don't pay tax per capita. In my family, our children have left home and our taxes are the same. We pay taxes per property. We are actually 29th of 31 towns in average taxes paid.

We actually have 25 homes assessed at 80 – 100k – but they're not on the market because we're living in them. The average tax rate is skewed by high end properties.

We have the 3rd lowest tax rate in NS in Mahone Bay – and why? If you have a \$100,000 home you're not actually paying higher taxes here than elsewhere. Lower end taxes are about neutral. Looking at increases of utilities: we might have a 75% increase in water rates, 60% increase in garbage disposal – but 60% of \$15 isn't much. It's not worth quibbling about.

Also, 2/3 of the expense on the water treatment facility is paid by provincial and federal governments.

There are possible financial solutions to consider.

- Assessments for some houses are way below market value. Maybe they should be adjusted.
- We could generate bylaw revenue if town employees could issue tickets rather than hiring an officer to do it.
- How about selling the school land to the nature trust?

Veryan Haysom

- Town-owned land. I'm concerned about the procedures followed for disposal or sale of the land. Council should commit the town to hold a public meeting and hold a plebiscite if 1/3 of the people there call for one.
- Financial suggestions – see discussion paper. One challenge is to increase revenues other than by increased rates and taxes. The town can earn money through creating a corporation – the Mahone Bay Housing Corporation – with a broad mandate including development of special needs and affordable housing. As long as the Town controlled 90% of voting shares and the corporation earned 90% of its revenue within the town, it would not pay income taxes. It could return earnings to the town through dividends or re-invest in housing. I suggest that the Town kick-start the Corporation by transferring the 3 acres on Kinburn St. to the Corporation. The town would take back a market value mortgage, the Corporation would develop financing, or could enter into a joint venture with a private developer.
- Sustainability. The town must establish an integrated community sustainability plan, with consideration of the environmental, cultural, social and economic dimensions of the town's identity. To assist the town do this, I suggest an ad-hoc citizens advisory council on sustainability with working groups in the 4 areas mentioned holding informal kitchen table meetings.

Richard Nowe

Lifelong resident 86 Fairmont, next to the soccer field and driveway. I have in my mind the best interests of the whole town. I thought this plan was great – especially for volunteerism. I'm a 35 year veteran of the fire department and am now Lions Club president. We need development. The fire department used to have 40 members, and the majority lived in Mahone Bay. There are now only 27, with only 9 living in the town. How is this fire department going to live up to its motto, "to protect the beauty around us"? And the Lions Club supports lots of things including youth soccer. But I don't feel that the soccer field is as important as the chance to bring in more people in the volunteer sector. If you don't believe me, come along to the next fire. Sometimes only 5 members respond to the call. This year we could no longer do our garden party which was a major fundraiser for us – a social gathering that's been taking place for 50-60 years, but we just don't have the volunteers. We also do things for the classic boat festival. Seniors can't respond to alarms.

Mike Vautour

I'm a CFA and am soon going away again. But I've developed projects that are here to stay. One is a sustainable community survey, helping to create a database of what people are prepared to do for sustainability. There are simple ways to save water for example. There's \$24,000 allotted to Mahone Bay to do this.

I also created the Youth Stewardship Centre with Jake Wentzell who is reaching out to 200 youth. It's inspired by the green space, and the Centre needs that green space to operate. It just started in April.

- The Nova Scotia Sea School wants to relocate as their rent in Lunenburg is going way up. I talked to the Director, Amy Schwartz and Paul Seltzer at MBC about it – we should try to fit them in.

Karen Janigan

I married a Mahone Bayer, and we're living in his parents' house. I've lived in a lot of different places. I have a lot of unanswered questions.

- Are we going to protect the old school lands? All of it? Can some of it be developed?
- Where is all the town owned land? How many undeveloped lots do we have that would be available?
- Do we put a surcharge on vacant property that hasn't been developed? Is it high enough?
- Do we do a debenture run in the town when we need money?
- We're not in charge of our assessments. They are presently capped at 10% and soon will be capped at the inflation rate. If we raise the rates, can we shelter the people who don't have the income to pay?
- Is there another way to tax than a flat tax?
- How many people here work in this town? How can we make it so more people who have to work CAN work in this town?
- Can we do an incubator for the arts – where the town invests in a formal way for artists to come – with business support, shipping support, raising money in town to build on a centre of excellence?
- How many people in the town are sitting on committees? There is a great brain trust here in this room. People have to step up. We need young people.

My husband left here in 1978 and thought he'd never be able to move back. He's lucky, one of the few of his class who are living here now. We need more people to be able to do that.

Lila O'Connor – lived here 45 years.

I was going to speak for myself, but feel I have to speak as a Town councillor. I have been asked, who is on the committee that organized this meeting.

- Regarding the soccer field, the town looks after the field for 25 weeks.
- As chair of PAC this is the 6th meeting that we've had in the last 5? years. We've had open meetings before. The Chamber of Commerce had a meeting and people did not attend. There were opportunities for input; when the old school was being turned over to the centre there was a meeting. You wanted

to see development on the rest of the land. We are now discussing the rest of the old school land. This is the 6th public meeting on the subject.

- We have the lowest tax rate but also the highest assessment. Assessment went up 4% and the tax rate went down. Town does not have any input into assessment. We have to go along with province. The 10% cap is only on older homes, not new ones.
- Do we discount lower income persons on their property taxes? Yes we do that.
- Anything mentioned here this evening, the council has looked at it. We have tried to satisfy the majority of the people. We do have a swimming pool, a tennis club, playground, soccer field, and we were told that maybe we could do something with the ---
- We are not new and just starting. As a councillor we have done everything we could.

Deborah Hickman

Been living here 23 years. We're here because we have a house. What we don't have here is work. We're here because we love this community, and we spend most of our time volunteering here. My husband has worked all over the province, and I commute to Baffin Island. I'm involved with a tourist business here and 2 months a year is not enough to make a living.

- What we need here is not necessarily more houses first, we need work. I'm not saying that council has not tried to attract industry and jobs, but we need more.
- There are properties around town where there could be industry, behind the plastics plant to the rail line, if they would sell it – like HB Studios in Lunenburg. There's a large heritage building on Main St. for sale.
- The Town needs to be proactive.
- I do thank council for what they have done. It hasn't been overlooked.

Lisa Linscott, 33 Zwicker

I'm a longtime CFA, been here for 25 years. This is home to me. There are things I love and things I detest about the town.

- I love the green space. Someone said there are other green spaces in town? Very few. None that can compare with the acreage in back of town. As a Guide and Brownie leader I went there all the time, and now go with my dog as the kids have grown.
- I was recently involved through my work with the Imagine Bridgewater program. I was very sad for Mahone Bay that we have so little green space – we could develop it better. Bridgewater has more green space.
- I am of a moderate income level, having been a single mother. It has been very difficult, and I've worked hard. It's very difficult to sustain a household and live in this town. I'm sorry, the prices mentioned for the homes in this development are not for moderate income people like me. They're too expensive.
- I work with seniors. We need to help them, but not at the expense of younger people.

Joe Feeney.

- Keith, I apologize, about the calculations [in the mailout] – there's a math error in the decline in population figure.
- You're right; the use of per capita is not appropriate. We have the highest tax assessment per household, not per capita, true.
- Our tax rate is low because our assessments are high.
- And yes, we do have a system where we rebate taxes to those on limited income.

Block 4 – What could citizen involvement look like in Mahone Bay?

[Comments from the floor]

Invite town council to set up an ad hoc committee to work with citizens who would be invited to participate in it.

Wasn't there a list of things that people might be interested in – environment, economics, cultural, social justice... committees could be formed around those working groups suggested by Veryan Haysom. Citizens could be invited to participate in those groups – even have signup sheets. Groups could do research and discussion on the issues.

Town has a Planning Advisory Committee. Perhaps some people would like to join. It meets the first Tuesday of every month. There are three members of public who are members. Meetings are open to the public. It will be meeting again in September.

Specific short term ideas – Council needs to let us know what they're going to do about them. I've heard more ideas tonight than I've heard in a long time. They need to be named and brought to Town Council for them to work on. And have citizens involved in specific working groups.

What I need is a managed, coherent planning process that I feel I could be involved in. I wasn't aware of the 6 meetings that Lila mentioned; perhaps they were piecemeal, not integrated, like 20-20 Vision or Imagine Bridgewater. I need a large vision that I could plug into.

(Richard Novossiltzeff) Regarding the Watershed Committee – there will be new regulations shortly re Oakland Lake. No one from Mahone Bay showed up at the meetings that were called. How can we get some kind of involvement from the public? This is incredible tonight, this kind of participation.

(Virginia Uhlman) Every year we ask for people to serve on various committees. Sometimes we get no response at all. More people want to be on PAC but not the other committees. And run for Town Council. Councillors are often acclaimed, not elected, as there's no one else interested in running. Elections are in October [2008]. Get more involved in the governance of the Town.

(Jim Wentzell) There can be a lot of informal communication in a small town. You can get your voice heard on a one-by-one basis; speak personally to Joe, Jim, councillors.

(Sharon Thomas, new in town) I got inspired by a lot of the people here at the last meeting, and want to help out but had no idea how to go about doing that. If someone could leave names and phone numbers so I'd know who to contact. I'm interested in working groups.

E-mail list.

Set up a database. Access the town, communicate better by e-mail, get the internet working for the town. Ask the people.

The rules of order at committee meetings aren't working and that's part of why people don't go. The Town should be operating with a structure that is integrated, and that enables us all to be involved together. There needs to be a group of people who will figure out a process to present to the public about how we can proceed. We need a group to work together on the next step. Talk with Sue Bookchin.

To publicize meetings, notices in the paper don't work anymore. Use e-mail and internet.

Get 3 people from the organizing committee together with 3 people from the council.

(Valerie Hearder) I'm the one who called this meeting. We (the organizers) have a website – and we will put the information from this meeting on the website. This issue has woken up the community in an exciting and deep way. This is a different kind of issue, one that really touches people. But I want to know that if I as a citizen put in my energy and time, will my ideas be listened to by Council? I need to know that we'll be taken seriously. We need a mechanism by which citizens can participate in the process in an active way.

These notes were scribed during the meeting by Heather Holm and reviewed and edited by several others.