



Local Governance Hub

Research | Evaluation | Training | Engagement

The Local Governance Hub collaborates with local and regional governments, First Nations governments and organisations, community organisations and a wide range of professionals to support their capacity building and development goals. We work on research, evaluation, training and engagement.

This LGI Policy Briefs Series shares research and practice on local governance.

Series editor:
Tamara Krawchenko
Associate Professor
School of Public Administration
TamaraKrawchenko@Uvic.ca

Citation: Byrne, K. (2025) Enhancing Public Participation in the Town of Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, *Local Governance Hub Policy Briefs*, No. 3, pgs. 1-5.

Published: 2025-09-22

Enhancing Public Participation in the Town of Lunenburg, Nova Scotia

Kayla Byrne

¹ Legislative & Policy Advisor, Town of Lunenburg, Nova Scotia

* Correspondence: kbyrne@townoflunenburg.ca

Key messages

- The Town of Lunenburg lacks a comprehensive public participation strategy, leaving engagement fragmented and reactive.
- Councillors, staff, and residents all expressed frustration with late-stage consultation and weak feedback loops that undermine trust.
- While legislated processes meet procedural requirements, they fail to provide meaningful opportunities for collaboration.
- A phased, tiered framework, combining informal dialogue, advisory committees, and co-designed initiatives, would strengthen transparency and inclusivity.
- Embedding participation into governance culture can restore trust and align decision-making with community priorities.

Introduction

The Town of Lunenburg faces a key governance challenge: the absence of a comprehensive public participation strategy. Current practices rely heavily on legislated processes such as public hearings, which often occur too late in the decision-making cycle to meaningfully influence outcomes. As a result, engagement tends to be reactive, fragmented, and insufficient for building the trust and collaboration that small communities rely on.

This gap has been visible in recent cases. At a July 2023 Council meeting, residents called for more inclusive opportunities to shape decisions (YouTube, Town of Lunenburg, 2023). Earlier, the 2019–2020 Project Lunenburg process successfully engaged over 400 residents in developing the Comprehensive Community Plan, yet follow-through on participatory commitments has been inconsistent, leaving many feeling excluded (Ryan, 2023). Controversies around a proposed vending bylaw and a street renaming effort, intended as a step toward reconciliation, further illustrate how poorly designed engagement processes can delay decisions and erode public confidence (YouTube, Town of Lunenburg, 2023; Armstrong, 2023).

In response to these challenges, this brief draws on a review of the Town of Lunenburg's municipal policies and plans, interviews with councillors and staff, and a resident focus group to assess current practices and identify pathways forward. It argues that by moving from reactive consultation to proactive collaboration, Lunenburg can cultivate a participatory culture rooted in accountability, transparency, and shared stewardship.

Background

Lunenburg's approach to engagement relies mainly on what is required by law, resulting in a reactive model of public involvement. For example, the Town's Climate Change Action Plan was

developed internally by staff to meet provincial requirements, with no public input because additional engagement was not mandated (CBCL Consulting, 2015). The Planning Public Participation Program Policy (2024) improved consultation on land-use planning, but it leaves out other important areas, such as non-planning-related bylaws, policies, and budgets.

Other Canadian municipalities show what more comprehensive approaches can look like. Vancouver's Grandview-Woodland Citizens' Assembly gave residents a central role in shaping a neighbourhood plan (Magnusson, 2020). Guelph has piloted participatory budgeting, letting citizens directly decide how to allocate municipal funds (Pinnington et al., 2009). Lethbridge revised its Municipal Housing Strategy using surveys and online idea-sharing platforms (City of Lethbridge, n.d.). These cases demonstrate how inclusive, structured processes can build legitimacy and a stronger sense of shared ownership over decisions.

Lunenburg's own Comprehensive Community Plan acknowledges this gap and calls for a broader public participation strategy (Project Lunenburg, 2020). Without deliberate action, however, the Town risks maintaining an engagement model that meets procedural requirements but fails to meaningfully connect residents to decision-making.

The Comprehensive Community Plan: Big Vision, Weak Follow-Through

The Comprehensive Community Plan (CCP), developed through Project Lunenburg (2019–2020), represents the Town's most ambitious effort at community planning to date. However, despite this strong start, sustaining engagement during implementation has proven challenging. The CCP's Implementation and Monitoring chapter stresses that the plan "cannot be achieved by the Town alone" and calls for a "collective impact approach" involving ongoing collaboration (Town of Lunenburg, 2020, p. 186). Yet the plan provides limited guidance on how, when, and with whom this involvement should occur. Since adoption, several actions intended to embed participation show little evidence of progress.

A review of CCP actions revealed a mixed picture:

- Limited or stalled progress: Engagement-related initiatives such as sea-level rise workshops and a recreation facilities strategy show little sign of being carried out.
- Narrow implementation: The updated Public Participation Program Policy (2024) applies only to land-use planning, leaving other areas untouched.
- Partial successes: Reforms to the Committees Policy (2023) and creation of a Cultural Tourism Working Group (2024) broadened involvement, but only modestly.
- Missed opportunities: A recent street renaming effort tied to reconciliation goals drew criticism when Council chose a name that conflicted with community survey results and input from Mi'kmaq representatives.

These gaps reveal a clear disconnect: while the CCP demonstrates Lunenburg's capacity to design inclusive processes, the Town has struggled to translate that vision into practice. Without stronger mechanisms for follow-through, legitimacy and trust in municipal governance are weakened.

Councillors: Support for Engagement, but Still Procedural

Interviews with six of the seven Town of Lunenburg councillors revealed both aspirations for stronger participation and challenges in practice. Councillors generally valued legislated engagement processes as examples where resident input felt meaningful. At the same time, they acknowledged frustration over communication gaps, particularly in the case of the vending bylaw, where unclear messaging fueled public opposition and forced delays.

Councillors expressed interest in experimenting with earlier and more informal opportunities for dialogue, such as drop-in sessions or "coffee with council," to build trust and reach residents who may not attend formal hearings. However, they also identified barriers:

- Dominance of vocal minorities, which can discourage wider participation.
- Misinformation on social media.
- Balancing trade-offs between community expectations, fiscal realities, and legal obligations.

Although councillors consistently called for the creation of a public participation strategy, their framing of participation remained largely procedural, emphasizing consultation and expectation management rather than shared decision-making. This suggests a risk that engagement could remain compliance-driven, rather than evolving toward collaborative governance.

Staff: Progress, but Capacity and Structure Hold Back Engagement

Interviews with five Town staff members highlighted both progress in public participation and persistent challenges. Staff pointed to improvements in transparency through social media use and the addition of public input as a standing Council agenda item. They also noted successes such as workshop-styled engagement sessions, which allowed for deeper dialogue and trust-building, though they were resource-intensive and difficult to repeat consistently.

Staff expressed interest in adopting a tiered framework for engagement: using lighter methods for routine matters and reserving intensive methods (such as workshops, focus groups) for major initiatives. They emphasized the value of informal settings such as drop-in sessions and conversations at community spaces, which were seen as more approachable than formal hearings in Council Chambers. Inclusivity was a recurring theme, with staff stressing the need to engage underrepresented groups through hybrid in-person and digital methods.

At the same time, they identified the following barriers:

- Limited staff capacity, which restricts the Town's ability to sustain resource-intensive or frequent engagement.
- Adversarial meeting formats, which discourage participation from quieter or less confident residents.
- Lack of feedback loops, leaving residents uncertain about how their contributions are considered or used.

Staff underscored the importance of transparency and clearer communication strategies to demonstrate how resident input shapes decisions. They also emphasized balancing public perspectives with professional expertise, noting frequent tensions between heritage preservation, economic growth, and environmental sustainability. Ultimately, they stressed that participation should be treated as an ongoing dialogue embedded in governance rather than a series of one-off events.

Residents: Desire for Early, Transparent, and Collaborative Engagement

A focus group with five residents who participated in a February 2024 lawn naturalization bylaw co-design workshop revealed both optimism about more collaborative engagement and frustration with how public input is ultimately used. Residents appreciated the small-group format of the bylaw workshop, which allowed diverse voices to be heard, but they felt their contributions were overshadowed when late-stage opposition derailed the bylaw process. This experience reinforced a broader perception that participation in Lunenburg often comes too late to matter.

Residents expressed a strong desire for earlier involvement in projects, beginning at the planning and brainstorming stage rather than at the point of approval. They emphasized the importance of a comprehensive communication strategy that blends traditional methods (mailouts, bulletin boards) with modern tools (email newsletters, a user-friendly website, social media) to ensure information reaches all segments of the community. While Facebook was acknowledged as useful for quick updates, participants were concerned that it amplified misinformation and privileged the loudest voices.

Other barriers identified by the resident focus group are as follows:

- Late-stage engagement, which creates frustration and undermines trust.
- Over-reliance on narrow communication channels, leaving out residents less active online.
- Perceived dominance of "usual suspects", where the same voices are heard repeatedly.

Residents also called for more structured methods, such as World Cafés or talking circles, to create balanced dialogue and avoid domination by a few individuals. They recommended strengthening advisory committees by clarifying their mandates and ensuring their input is integrated into Council decisions. Many also pointed to untapped grassroots energy in areas like housing, food security, and energy poverty, urging the Town to act as a facilitator rather than a gatekeeper by supporting, connecting, and resourcing community initiatives.

Transparency and accountability were recurring themes. Participants stressed the need for clear feedback loops so residents know how their input is used and why certain suggestions may not be adopted. Without this follow-up, they felt engagement risks being perceived as tokenistic. Ultimately, residents expressed a strong aspiration for public participation to move beyond formal hearings and consultations toward an ongoing, collaborative partnership between the Town and its community.

Recommendations

Across councillors, staff, and residents, there was broad agreement that Lunenburg needs a new approach to public participation. Councillors spoke of the limits of procedural consultation, staff emphasized the need for tiered and inclusive methods, and residents voiced frustration with late-stage, tokenistic processes. Together, these perspectives point to a need for change: engagement must move from compliance to collaboration.

Building stronger participation will not happen overnight. It requires short-term improvements in communication and transparency, medium-term structures that create stability, and long-term cultural change that embeds participation as a core value of governance. The recommendations below outline a phased pathway to achieve this.

Immediate (0–6 months)

- **Develop a Communication Strategy:** Use both traditional and digital channels (mailouts, newsletters, social media, bulletin boards) to provide timely, accessible updates and counter misinformation.
- **Pilot Informal Engagements:** Test low-barrier opportunities such as “Coffee with Council,” pop-up conversations, or World Café-style dialogues to make participation approachable.
- **Introduce Feedback Loops:** Publish summaries of input, show how it informed decisions, and create an online tracker for project updates.

Intermediate (6 months–2 years)

- **Adopt a Tiered Framework:** Match engagement intensity to project significance, reserving workshops and co-design for major initiatives while using lighter tools for routine matters.
- **Strengthen Advisory Committees:** Clarify mandates, provide training, and integrate committee advice more directly into Council decisions.
- **Expand Outreach:** Use plain language and partner with community organizations to better reach underrepresented groups.

Long-Term (2+ years)

- **Embed Participation in Governance:** Require engagement plans for major projects and develop metrics to measure success.
- **Collaborate with Community Groups:** Support co-led initiatives that leverage grassroots networks and expertise.
- **Evaluate and Adapt:** Conduct regular reviews of engagement practices, using both data and community feedback to refine approaches over time.

Conclusion

This research asked: *How can the Town of Lunenburg develop and implement effective public participation strategies that align with the Comprehensive Community Plan (CCP) and address the needs of residents, Council, and staff?* Findings from councillor and staff interviews, a resident focus group, and a review of the CCP reveal that while Lunenburg has demonstrated the capacity

for meaningful engagement, its overall approach remains fragmented and largely reactive, too often tied to legislative requirements rather than ongoing collaboration.

Across all groups, there was consensus on the need for stronger, more inclusive participation. Councillors called for earlier and more relational forms of dialogue, staff emphasized flexible and tiered approaches that reflect capacity, and residents voiced frustrations with inaccessible formats, unclear communication, and sidelined contributions. Together, these perspectives point to a central conclusion: Lunenburg's current practices undervalue public input and, without reform, risk further alienating the community.

This brief proposes a phased pathway forward, comprising short-term improvements in communication and feedback loops, medium-term adoption of a tiered engagement framework and stronger advisory committees, and long-term institutional change to embed co-governance into municipal practice. By moving from reactive consultation to proactive co-creation, Lunenburg can cultivate a participatory culture rooted in accountability and shared stewardship. Councillors and staff who lead this shift will not only strengthen trust and transparency but also embody the democratic values that underpin effective and resilient local governance.

References

- Armstrong, L. (2023, December 5). 'We've got this wrong': Lunenburg mayor expects Queen Street name to be overturned. CTV News. Retrieved from <https://atlantic.ctvnews.ca/2023/12/5/n-s--town-that-changed-cornwallis-street-to-queen-now-considerin.html>
- CBCL Limited. (2015). Municipal Climate Change Action Plan for the Town of Lunenburg. <https://townoflunenburg.ca/town-services/planning-and-development/282-lunenburg-mccap-dated-february-2015/file.html>
- Magnusson, R. (2020). Unsettled democracy: The case of the Grandview-Woodland Citizens' Assembly. In *Creating Spaces of Engagement* (pp. 117–138). <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487519889-007>
- Municipal Housing Strategy - community engagement. (n.d.). Get Involved Lethbridge. <https://getinvolvedlethbridge.ca/municipal-housing-strategy?tool=qanda>
- Pinnington, E., Lerner, J., & Schugurensky, D. (2009). Participatory budgeting in North America: the case of Guelph, Canada. *Journal of Public Budgeting, Accounting & Financial Management*, 21(3), 454–483. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jpbafm-21-03-2009-b005>
- Project Lunenburg. (2020). Comprehensive Community Plan. Town of Lunenburg. <https://townoflunenburg.ca/town-services/planning-and-development/628-ccp-final-2020-with-appendix-a/file.html>
- Ryan, H. (2023, March 1). Town of Lunenburg says world will be watching its new housing development. CBC. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/lunenburg-housing-development-1.6762942>
- Town of Lunenburg. (2023, October 24). Committees Policy. Retrieved from <https://townoflunenburg.ca/1492-committees-policy/file.html>
- Town of Lunenburg. (2023, May 17). April 11, 2023 Council meeting [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLMxeGNimE>
- Town of Lunenburg. (2024). Cultural Tourism Working Group terms of reference. Retrieved from <https://townoflunenburg.ca/committees/1657-cultural-tourism-working-group-terms-of-reference.html>
- Town of Lunenburg. (2024). Planning Public Participation Policy. Retrieved from <https://townoflunenburg.ca/1665-planning-public-participation-policy/file.html>

