



SAYING GOODBYE TO STELLARTON MEMORIAL RINK

WHEN THE TOWN COUNCIL of Stellarton, Nova Scotia learned last Fall that their beloved Memorial Rink needed about \$4.1 million in repairs and upgrades, one councillor said they felt like they'd been kicked in the gut. "Emotions started running high immediately," says Susan Higdon, Stellarton's town clerk. The rink was an important piece of history in the town and had been serving the community well for 72 years.

The lead up to the bad news started last Spring at budget time when council was considering buying a dehumidifier for the rink that would have cost about \$80,000. The town engineer knew the building had several issues and suggested doing an aging building audit. Higdon understands why some councillors had trouble accepting the report when it came to them in October with a multimillion-dollar price tag. The town was immersed in its work on asset management and Council knew it would be difficult to justify the cost when they took into consideration the town's many other infrastructure priorities.

One of the toughest decisions a town council will ever make is likely the one to decommission a historic and well-loved asset like a rink or arena. Politicians know well that they'll be the first to bear the backlash from community members who carry a strong emotional attachment to the places that created their childhood memories and planted community roots, and none of them wanted a photo-op with a wrecking ball. But the audit revealed that the rink wasn't safe and basically every aspect of it needed work, including electrical upgrades and structural repairs. Council wanted to look at all possible options to save the rink. This led Higdon and the town planner, finance department, the town engineer and the building inspector to review the requirements line by line to determine whether they could find any savings, with no luck. Maintenance had been deferred for too long and all the work had to be done.

Stellarton is an economically vibrant community, even though its population has been declining. Census data show that it has shrunk from about 4,700 people in 2011 to about 4,200 people today, but it does still have a healthy mix of young families, working age people and seniors. Being strategically located right on the Trans-Canada highway in Pictou County, it has benefitted greatly from a decision made by a previous council to develop a business park near the highway. It's also the headquarters of Sobey's, a large grocery store chain in the region, and it has just welcomed a new cannabis plant that has brought another couple of hundred jobs thanks to the federal government's legalization of cannabis last year. A full 50% of its tax base is commercial, which any community in Atlantic Canada would envy. The community college there also adds to the overall vitality of the town.



STELLARTON MEMORIAL RINK SERVED THE COMMUNITY FOR 72 YEARS



INSIDE STELLARTON MEMORIAL RINK

Even with a stable and prosperous economy though, the council's eyes were wide open about how approving a huge capital outlay to fix the rink would affect Stellarton's long-term financial sustainability. Stellarton had joined AIM Network's cohort program last September to strengthen its asset management practices. The mayor and five other staff are participating, and that means they were all developing a good understanding of the state and condition of their infrastructure and a roadmap to set priorities. One of the most important things they learned is that they have a lot of work to do on their buildings, not only because they're aging, but because they need to meet new provincial accessibility standards by 2030. Besides the rink, their town hall and the public works barn haven't had a lot of love and maintenance over the years and the town hall isn't accessible.



(Continued from Page 1) Some other big issues for Stellarton include the need to develop contingency plans for water and opportunities to conserve because its water source, which comes from the river, can be inconsistent. They still have over 11km of sewer that need replacement and the town is also working on how best to develop land that will soon be reclaimed from a coal mine that's reached the end of its life. The entire annual budget for the town is only \$8 million. When they looked into whether they could afford to borrow the money to finance the rehabilitation of the rink, council became aware that it would affect their ability to borrow for the more urgent infrastructure priorities in the project pipeline.

Council decided that the only responsible decision was to decommission the rink. Hidgon remembers the day they met with the rink commission, which includes some residents, as one of the most intimidating days of her career. They were the grassroots users, the people who lived and breathed the rink. She was expecting a huge backlash. She was completely surprised when the commission understood the dilemma right away after they were given the facts. She said to Council, as tough as this is, this will be your gauge around how the public will react.

With all the evidence available to back up their decision, council was ready to inform the public. The timing couldn't have been better, because Stellarton was participating in the community engagement stream of AIM Network's cohort program and decided they could use some of the knowledge they were gaining. Higdon says that the most valuable lesson they brought to the process was to be confident that it wasn't going to be a consultation. Council had made its decision based on sound evidence.

When it came time to hold the public information sessions in January, staff were prepared. They had all the data on how much the rink was being used, how much they would need to raise taxes to keep it operational, and information about the alternative services residents could access at the new wellness centre, which was only 3 km away and had two rinks. People had lots of questions, and staff had the answers. Even so, some people in the community weren't happy with the decision and wanted to look at what options were available to save the rink. They

established a concerned citizens group and set up a petition to save the rink even though they had an electrician among them look at the building and find that the condition was worse than reported in the building audit. Council agreed to let them present alternative solutions in March, when they would make a final decision about whether to close the rink.

By March the group had come to recognize the magnitude of the challenge to come up with a viable solution, so they came back to council with three requests: 1) to leave the heat and power on, 2) to be able to ask town staff further questions and gain access to the building, and 3) to not close the rink permanently. Council agreed to give them a year to come up with a viable, sustainable plan. And while not one person in the room wanted to close the rink, three out of four councilors and the mayor voted to officially close its doors on March 31st, while leaving it in tact until February 2020.

Higdon says they wanted to honour the rink, so they kept it open for people to do some skating until the official closure. They had talked about having an official cake and ceremony, but decided to hold off, because the citizen's group is still hoping to find a solution. In the end, because the town was so well prepared, the whole process was accomplished without a major public backlash. She believes that because staff and council have been working together on asset management planning since last Fall, there's a growing awareness among council that they're not only representing the needs of the community today. They know their decisions will have an impact beyond their seat in office and will need to serve the community 50 years or more down the road.

The decision that Stellarton Town Council faced with its Memorial Rink is one that other Canadian communities may be more likely to see in the years ahead, as councils become better equipped to respond to the data and information that asset management planning brings to the council table. If they must, at least they can have confidence that their decision is transparent and defensible.

Interview with **Susan Higdon**,
Town Clerk, Town of Stellarton, Nova Scotia



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"I want to add an important comment on the way the cohort program worked, because, in the beginning, I had to be sold on this concept by our town engineer. The way that we're all engaged in this process and how we are all working on it as a team, we understand it because we wrote it; it really is a brilliant concept. This is something that was done in house by current staff and council and everybody has buy in. I really applaud the AIM Network for doing it this way and I would highly recommend it to any municipality that had the opportunity to do it, and to network with other similar sized municipalities is an added bonus."

- **Susan Higdon**, Town Clerk, Stellarton, Nova Scotia

AIM NETWORK SUPPORTS THE COURAGEOUS JOURNEY OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

BY CHRISTINA BENTY



IMAGINE IF I were to walk down the street of any municipality in Canada and pose the following question to residents: “How often would you like to have clean, clear, safe drinking water come out of your tap?” Besides looking at me like I had two heads, they may be wondering what century I have escaped from. Since the question is rather self evident, it is highly unlikely I would be graced with an answer.

Our citizens expect good quality drinking water 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It is a reasonable expectation that most of us take for granted along with all the other services and functions provided by the local government. Water and sanitary systems, paved roads and sidewalks, parks and trails, buildings such as fire halls, recreational facilities, and multi-purpose gathering spaces are all examples of community services and infrastructure that make our communities livable and viable.

Although citizens rely on these services, they have no grasp of the magnitude of the cost associated with providing them. We have been living off the backs of fifty, seventy, sometimes hundred-year-old infrastructure, allowing us to avail ourselves of a constructed prosperity that our grandparents, even in their wildest dreams, could not have fathomed. Over time, budget constraints and cost pressures have not allowed for all publicly-owned assets to be maintained at an optimum level of service. That coupled with the absence of a clear understanding of the cost implications of maintaining and renewing

existing infrastructure, has led to a nation wide deferral of investment into the assets that provide key services to all citizens.

With aging infrastructure that needs renewing and replacing, one of the more complex conversations that communities must have is how to become sustainable and what decisions are required to go down that path. The trend of declining infrastructure is steadily eroding the very foundation of what makes our communities great places to live, work, and play. With increasing cost pressures and relatively low tolerance for tax increases, local governments need the support of their citizens to inform them on how to target their limited resources effectively. Elected officials are faced with the task of engaging the community in a dialogue to consider what resources/services they want and more importantly, what are they willing to pay for.

The community engagement stream of AIM Network’s cohort program is enabling several communities in Nova Scotia to embark on the courageous journey of engaging their citizens on their unique challenges surrounding aging infrastructure. A dedicated and passionate team from each of the ten participating municipalities are learning about the range of options for community engagement and collaborative consultation. Each participating local government has been working on a community engagement strategy specific to their municipality. Some of the projects include:

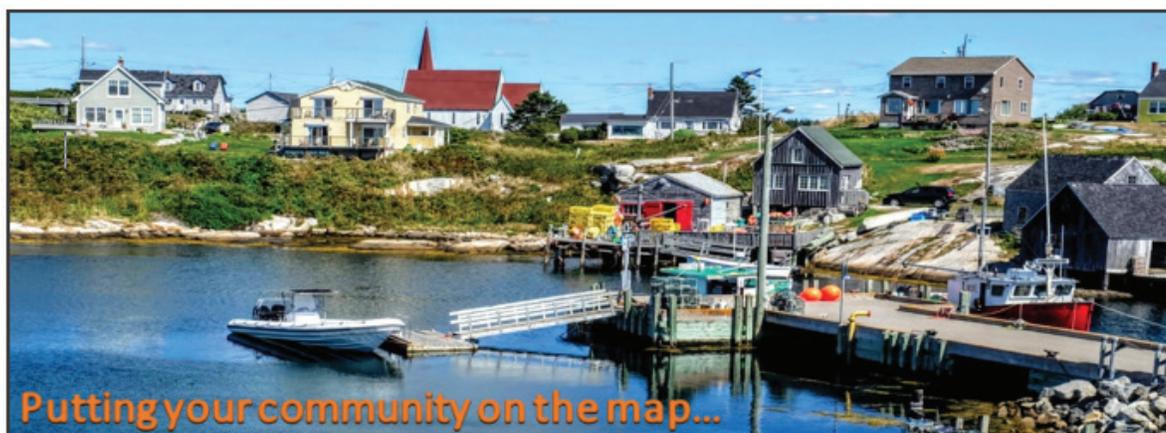
➔ **Closure of a trail:** A municipality is faced with closing a portion of a historical walking trail. It has been deemed unsafe and requires significant investment to make it useable again. Council has been exploring a range of both restoration and funding options, and they are asking for public input. Their community engagement project demonstrates their intention to educate the public and dispel misinformation so that residents can participate in a meaningful way.

➔ **Facility replacement:** Another municipality has two key municipal facilities that have long outgrown their useful life in the current environment and need to be replaced. Because the town continues to “make do” in an increasingly untenable situation, they face the challenge of having their motivations questioned for an upgrade in their working environment. Communication with residents is needed to build a better understanding of how these projects are a necessary component of safe, secure, sustainable service delivery.

➔ **Recreation facility closure:** This municipality is faced with the closure of a highly valued community recreational facility. Given its condition assessment and the requisite funds required to bring it up to the appropriate safety standards for public use, the fiscal strain on tax payers over the long term is unsustainable. Nevertheless, the facility has sentimental value and addressing the emotional element as well as the financial burden is a key component of the messaging.

As part of the cohort program, these local governments are creating their own living labs within their communities. Not only are they executing their community engagement strategies, the program includes the opportunity to reflect on what worked well and what could be better the next time. Although each project is unique, educating and engaging with citizens remains the collective intention. These community engagement endeavours highlight that the relationship between citizens and government is a shared responsibility. By building capacity and engaging one another in collaborative practice, there is an opportunity to recognize the common goal we all share: building healthy, vibrant, prosperous communities now and into the future.

Christina Benty is leading the community engagement stream of AIM Network’s cohort program.



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AIM NETWORK GEARING UP FOR 2019 ATLANTIC ASSET MANAGEMENT CONFERENCE

Planning is in full swing for the 2019 Atlantic Asset Management Conference, to be held in St. Johns, NL at the Sheraton Hotel on September 5-6. AIM Network is proud to be leading efforts alongside a dedicated planning committee of 11 municipal and infrastructure professionals in the region. Hotel rooms are now open for booking and registration for the conference will open in May.

AIM Network is calling on asset management practitioners to submit their ideas for presentations or sessions that will explore the conference theme *Piecing It All Together: From Awareness to Implementation*. Around that theme, AIM Network welcomes submissions that show how municipalities are addressing the following key asset management ingredients of success:

People – ensuring people have the skills, training, and competencies needed and are organized to successfully advance their AM programs;

Plans – developing plans for long-term infrastructure planning, capital program development, financing, and asset management plans by asset class; and

Progress and Performance – determining the effectiveness of our AM program, how well our efforts are being adopted throughout the municipality, what can be done to improve the program, and how we measure our success?

For more information about the conference and to access the call for abstracts, visit this link on AIM Network's website:

WWW.AIMNETWORK.CA/2019-CONFERENCE

Calendar of Events

WEBINAR: LEVELS OF SERVICE

TUESDAY, APRIL 30, 2019
(12:00 - 1:00 PM, ATLANTIC TIME)

Join this webinar to learn from municipalities involved in AIM Network's cohort program that have recently developed their current and target levels of service for core services. Daisy Foster, Managing Director of AIM Network will introduce the template they used to assess their current levels of service and determine whether there are performance gaps in relation to a common set of indicators for each service: regulatory requirements, capacity / availability of the service, safety, quality, reliability and environmental impacts. Municipalities also assessed sustainability gaps to estimate whether their services can meet expected demand based on near, mid, and long-term growth forecasts. Municipal presenters will then share what they have learned, including how they plan to address performance gaps.

PRESENTERS:

Rachael McLean, Planner, Development Officer and Director of Planning, Towns of Stellarton, Trenton and Westville, NS
Andy Daggett, Asset Manager, Three Rivers, PEI

Register now at this link: <https://www.aimnetwork.ca/webinar>

WEBINAR: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

TUES, JUNE 18, 2019
(12:00 - 1:00 PM, AT)

Save the date! AIM Network is hosting a webinar to share lessons from Nova Scotia municipalities that participated in the community engagement cohort. Municipalities are currently leading a diverse range of community engagement activities to help inform and receive input from the public on critical infrastructure challenges they are facing. Learn about the processes used and results achieved to date to support sound infrastructure decisions.

Registration for this webinar will open later this Spring.

ATLANTIC ASSET MANAGEMENT CONFERENCE

SEPTEMBER 5-6, 2019
ST. JOHNS, NL

AIM Network is hosting the Atlantic Asset Management Conference in St. John's, NL this year. "Piecing It All Together: Awareness to Implementation" will bring a wide range of municipal staff, elected officials and others in the region who will be sharing knowledge and collaborating to improve municipal asset management planning and practices. The call for submission of abstracts is open until May 17th, and conference registration opens in May.

For more information:
www.aimnetwork.ca/2019-conference

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MANAGING SHIFTING DEMOGRAPHICS IN MASSEY DRIVE, NEWFOUNDLAND

ONE OF THE biggest advantages for a municipal government serving a community experiencing steady growth is the new revenue that flows in from a higher tax base. One of the biggest challenges though, is keeping up with the new demands for services that new residents bring with them. That's exactly the challenge that the Town of Massey Drive, Newfoundland has been facing. The small community of about 1,700 people continues to grow steadily after a spike in the population about 10 to 15 years ago.

As a bedroom community beside the City of Corner Brook, Massey Drive has little or no commercial tax base and the town relies heavily on the residential taxes it collects to deliver services. The two small businesses in the town are an equipment repair shop and a company that works in the construction sector. Other than that, there are just a few small mom and pop shops here and there. Rodger Hunt, the town manager jokes that the only people who work in town are the ones who work for the town, and even then, there are only six staff in the municipality.

Hunt says that the influx of newer residents over the past decade and a half has reversed the demographic pyramid from what it used to be, which was dominated by seniors. Now there is a larger proportion of young families, teenagers and working age people. It's not surprising that with that change has come requests for more playgrounds and improved recreation services for families. With new revenues coming in from the growth of its residential tax base, the town has been able to do quite a bit to keep up with resident's demands while also expanding its core water and sewer services. The only aging infrastructure is along the original main street that runs through town because the town was incorporated in the 1970s, less than 50 years ago. One of their biggest projects lately has been to take on a fairly significant portion of the cost of twinning the sewer line that serves the community. Massey Drive purchases treated water as well as wastewater treatment services from the City of Corner Brook.

Massey Drive joined AIM Network's cohort program last Fall and their involvement has reinforced one of Hunt's top of mind concerns, which is the reality that the growth they've been experiencing

is inevitably going to level off and so will the tax base, so they need to be strategic about service delivery to ensure they can afford what they're building today over the longer term. He says that Massey Drive is running out of space to grow because they need the greenspace they have now, and he wants to help ensure that future councils aren't faced with a significant tax increase.

That insight has meant that the town has been thinking out of the box in meeting the newer demands for recreation services. They commissioned a recreation study last year because they want those services to be able to stand the test of time and be adaptable as their demographics change. They need to ensure that whatever they build can be used now by the whole community and eventually be re-purposed as efficiently as possible when the demand for a particular activity drops. How might they turn a basketball court into a tennis court, a skate park or a community garden? They're now being proactive in thinking through those scenarios before building. One creative solution they've moved forward with is building new basketball courts that have adjustable hoops so that all ages can use them.

Hunt points out that they've been managing their assets all along, but in a small municipality both staff and council tend to be generalists who know a little bit about everything. He feels that the work they're doing to improve their asset management practices will lead to better in-house capacity to do long-term infrastructure planning and will allow them to forecast future financial commitments more accurately. He used the analogy of emergency services to explain the shift. "Instead of putting out fires, we're going to be able to focus on fire prevention."

Over the next 18 months or so, the town will be focusing on addressing their knowledge gaps. One of the first things Hunt and his team found when they started doing the data collection was that they had data all over the place, some data was missing and over all they had a general lack of documentation. And with high staff turnover, that means that knowledge has continually been lost when people leave. His biggest takeaway from what he is learning about formalizing asset management planning is that those gaps will be eliminated and there will be no more guessing games. That will be immensely useful when it comes time to communicate with council and residents to set priorities and when it comes time to apply for infrastructure funding. Hunt is pleased that they're generally meeting their service levels for core services and feels fortunate to be in a strong position going forward. He says the cohort program came along at a perfect time because they're going to be able to get ahead of the curve in their planning.



PLAYGROUND IN MASSEY DRIVE, NL

Interview with **Rodger Hunt**,
Town Manager, Massey Drive, NL



THREE RIVERS, PEI

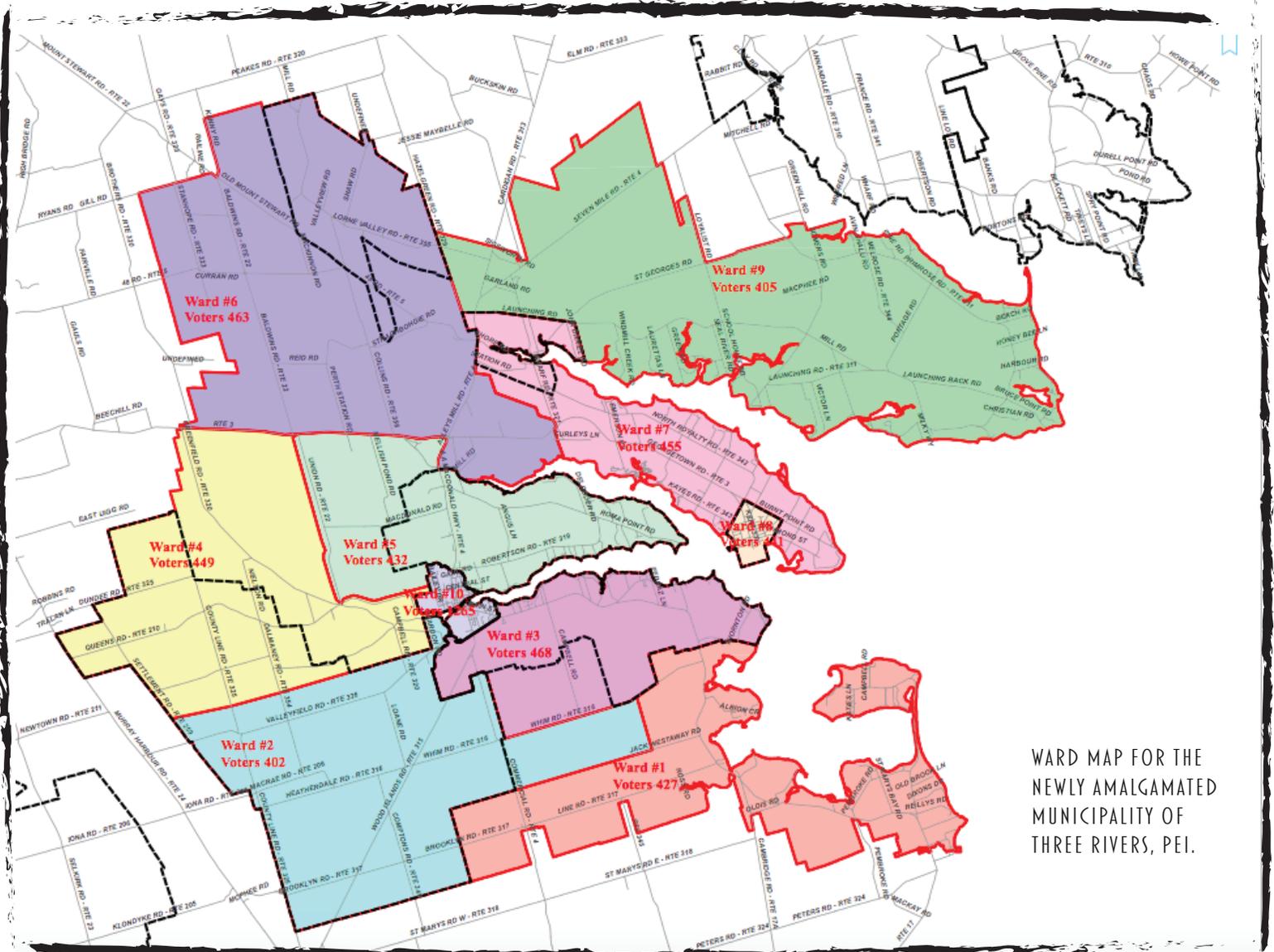
A NEWLY AMALGAMATED MUNICIPALITY SEES BENEFITS FROM STREAMLINING SERVICES

IT'S BEEN A bumpy year of transition for people in the Town of Three Rivers in eastern PEI, a brand new municipality that was born on September 28, 2018 as a result of the amalgamation of the former towns of Montague, with about 2,000 people, and Georgetown, with about 550, provide services like shopping and restaurants for about 12,000 people in the region who don't have services of their own.

Formerly a collection of very small towns and villages, Three Rivers is now the fourth largest municipality in the province, with

about 7,200 residents. Even so, it's still quite small and has a very rural character. Fishing and farming are the biggest economic drivers, while the larger town centres of Montague, with about 2,000 people, and Georgetown, with about 550, provide services like shopping and restaurants for about 12,000 people in the region who don't have services of their own.

Amalgamations can be politically messy and challenging to bring to fruition, because it can be hard to convince residents of the need for change and the benefits that will come to them by streamlining service delivery and evening out the tax base. It's not uncommon for people to be concerned about tax increases and the loss of control over decisions that will affect them. Andy Daggett, the asset manager for the new Town of Three Rivers is very open about the friction that still exists in the community. He feels the changing demographics are a reality that people have a hard time facing, because they want the places they call home to stay



WARD MAP FOR THE NEWLY AMALGAMATED MUNICIPALITY OF THREE RIVERS, PEI.

(Continued from Page 6) the same. But it simply wasn't going to be feasible for the smaller communities to survive on their own, with their shrinking population and tax base. Even though Montague itself has grown a bit over the last ten years, that growth hasn't kept up with all the people leaving the smaller communities. Overall, the municipality is facing a declining population and an aging demographic. That reality means that it's time to take a hard look at what services they can afford now and sustain over the longer term.

As the former CAO of the Town of Montague for 12 years prior to the amalgamation, Daggett knows the needs and financial realities of the communities well and has no doubt that the amalgamation was necessary. That's because Montague and Georgetown combined own about 90% of the assets of Three Rivers and provide most of the services for everyone who lives in the area, but their own residents were paying the bulk of the taxes to deliver those services. Daggett says that Montague's public library had 5,500 card carrying members, but only about 1,000 of them paying for the service. "The taxes were really different based on what side of the road people were on, even though they were getting the exact same services." Now the municipality has more people paying for the assets that everyone is benefiting from, and it's a more equitable structure. In fact, people in Montague and Georgetown have ended up with a modest decrease in their taxes.

Three Rivers joined AIM Network's cohort program in September just before the amalgamation, and Daggett feels the biggest benefit of asset management is the holistic lens it will bring to decisions about services. Their biggest challenge right now is getting all of their asset data compiled into one sensible format that will provide the big picture on their inventory and the condition of their

infrastructure. They've been separate communities for 100 years, and now they have to deal with owning multiple assets that deliver the same services. For example, they now have two sewer utilities and two rinks and they need to figure out how to manage that.

Daggett says that it's going to be critical to be able to present information to council in a way that's digestible. They now have a council of 13 that includes some people who have been elected for the first time. Others sat on councils whose entire budget was about \$50,000 per year, mostly to pay for fire services. Now they're getting their heads around making decisions about a \$3 million annual budget. Their biggest challenge will be maintaining the services they already have while expanding services in some underserved areas, particularly for water and sewer. They have people in the smaller communities with UV filtration systems in their homes to ensure their water is potable, and several businesses have holding tanks for wastewater because there's no room for a septic field. They're also trying to bolster up some of their existing facilities, which are at least 30 years old. They've been struggling to find the dollars for the annual operating expenses.

Daggett sees promise in formalizing asset management planning because it's going to help them get away from the approach they've used to date to make decisions, which has mostly considered the cost of building infrastructure and ensuring they get their fair share of infrastructure funding for those capital costs. They really haven't considered the full costs of operating, maintaining and eventually replacing their assets. That's what happened 12 years ago when they were getting funding to replace a 40-year-old rink. When the first rink was built in 1965, there was never a consideration of the full costs to operate the rink and what they would do when

it came time to replace it. He is aware that without infrastructure funding it is becoming very difficult to replace anything now, because there's so much money involved in meeting standards and codes and factoring in the full lifecycle costs including replacement.

Daggett does see a bright light at the end of the tunnel though. He is quite upbeat about the opportunity that both the amalgamation and their formal adoption of asset management will bring to his community. Each of the towns were so squeezed for cash before that it was difficult for them to invest in anything beyond their day-to-day services that could improve their communities. None of them could put much money towards economic development. Now that everyone is working together, they can put more funding towards the services everyone wants. And by building in a more robust analysis of the full lifecycle costs of their infrastructure investments, he feels they'll be able to make the business case for greener investments. If they can show that a higher upfront cost to build better and greener will save taxpayers in the long run through operational savings, it will give council the data they need to make tough decisions and get beyond the lowest cost solution.

Daggett is hopeful that their work on asset management will be a bridge to support the community in accepting amalgamation and understanding the benefits to them, because people don't really understand how much the services cost. He feels that once they understand the full picture, the light bulb will go on and that support will come.

Interview with **Andy Daggett**,
Three Rivers, PEI



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