



Tantramar

COMMUNITY CONNECT

What We Heard

Tantramar Strategic Plan - External Engagement Report
August 2024



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Public Engagement



3

Public Sessions

82

In-person respondents

144

Online respondents

As part of council's work to support the municipality of Tantramar in developing a strategic plan, we engaged in several methods of external consultation, including in-person public engagement sessions in the community, an online survey open to the public, and a series of interviews and surveys with key stakeholders as identified by municipal staff.

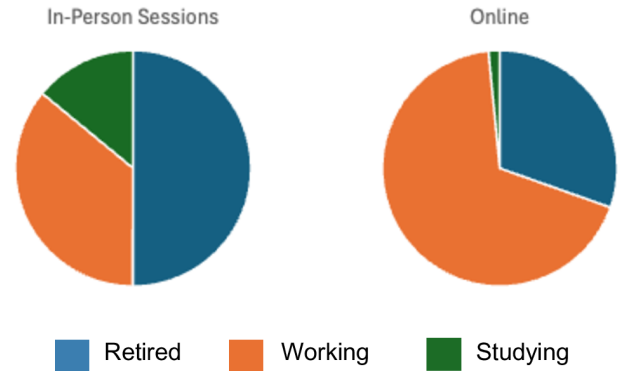
We detail here the results of those engagements, and the key themes and observations that Council can use to inform their strategic planning process.

Public engagement was conducted in Tantramar from August 17 to August 20, 2024 in the former Town of Sackville (Marshlands Inn), the former Village of Dorchester (Dorchester Veterans' Community Centre), and a rural location between Sackville and Midgic (Sackville Music Barn). A total of 82 respondents attended over all three sessions. Responses were also collected through an online survey, with some 144 responses.

Baseline Information

In all sessions, at least 85% of respondents reported living permanently in Tantramar, with half retired (47.8%), a third working (34.3%), and about one eighth studying (13.4%). There was little variation among sessions.

Online, even more respondents reported living permanently in Tantramar at 96%. Online respondents tended to be working (61.6%), with only 27.5% retired, and 1.4% studying. Retired and students respondents tended to prefer to join consultations in person compared to those working.



Quality of Life

Improves Quality of Life	Detracts of Quality of Life
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having nature-based solutions like storm water retention ponds • Outstanding natural areas integrated into the fabric of the municipality • Waterfowl Park • Local businesses • Walker Rd Trails • Small, quiet, friendly town with easy access to most everything • Climate adaptation in infrastructure • Migratory bird population • Farmer’s Market • Walking, hiking, and skiing options close to home • Distinctive local heritage • Family friendly events • Silver Lake • Sackville library • Mount Allison University • Peaceful, quiet, quite clean, it’s a rural area, close to the towns and city. Picturesque throughout all seasons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excessive noise and speed from vehicles • Fears of flooding and climate change impacts • Hard to get urgent healthcare without family doctor or transportation • No access to Wheaton Bridge/High Marsh Rd • Lack of active and public transportation • Lack of spaces for new businesses • Cost of housing/Cost of living • Excessive light pollution • Nowhere for visitors to stay • Lack of bike lanes/Fear of biking on roads • Having to leave for shopping, and inability to attract small business • High property tax • Hospital closes too early • Lack of police presence • Roads and sidewalks are poor • Lack of communication during storms & outages • Security against rising sea levels • Negativity and environment shuts down new ideas • Lack of local media • Negative and hateful comments online

Transportation

- Public transit interest in Tantramar:
 - In all sessions, intermunicipal buses and bike lanes scored the highest among residents, with shuttles to select locations also popular. Carsharing was only somewhat popular among residents at the more rural Music Barn.
 - The term Metrobus, meaning a municipal bus service, may not have been well-understood by respondents, which would explain the relatively high demand for public transport, but the low demand for “Metrobus”. It is also likely that residents feel transport around Tantramar qualifies as “regional transport”, a holdover from the pre-reform era.
 - A focus on regional and active transportation, especially bike lanes, is key. Diversification of transit is important, and options for rural mobility, particularly to reach healthcare centres, were key issues. Being able to get to Moncton or Halifax for appointments is important to residents without cars.
- There was some concern about transit across the Isthmus of Chignecto if flooding were to occur.
- Improving walkability, by building and maintaining sidewalks, for example, was also cited as a way to improve transit between the communities of Tantramar.
- Two regular suggestions from all sessions include:
 - Transforming the rail corridor into a bike/active transit throughfare
 - Reopening Wheaton Bridge and access to High Marsh Road for farmers to bring their goods to population centres at lower cost, to boost food production and economic productivity.
- Other ideas for transportation include:
 - Municipally coordinated ridesharing
 - Bus every half hour to major locations
 - Safe transport for seniors and kids requiring car seats
 - E-scooters and rental bikes/active transport
 - Uber/Lyft
 - Interprovincial/regional train service
 - Reliable cab service, especially after bars close
 - Sidewalks on both sides of every street
 - Transit may be outside the ability of the municipality to fund, given the cost and extent. Important to keep budget in mind
 - Overpasses and Pedways – Especially over the Trans-Canada Highway
 - More signage at dangerous intersections/driving locations
- Online respondents agreed that Bike Lanes, Select Shuttles, and Intermunicipal (Regional) Shuttles were the top choices, with a little more support for Municipal Bus Service than from those in-person. This is likely because more respondents recognized the term “Municipal Bus Service” than “Metrobus”. Otherwise, the results online and in-person were similar. Carsharing maintained its small but significant popularity among online respondents.

Sustainability

- The top three sustainability issues for residents were Renewable Energy, Local Food Production, and Biodiversity/Conservation, with relatively high popularity of Climate-Proofing Infrastructure in fourth. Watershed Protections and Regional Transportation tended to place low, but this does not imply the issues are not important. Rather, it may imply they are not viewed as typical solutions for improving sustainability.
- The themes pulled from the comments at each session were complimentary, with many ideas in common, including:
 - Hire a municipal Climate Change Coordinator
 - Reinforce the existing dyke system and be prepared to mitigate climate-related flooding, particular along the Isthmus.
 - Develop a connected active transportation system (possibly in/along rail beds)
 - Draft heritage preservation bylaws
 - Managing and developing new renewable energy projects
 - Manage/remove invasive species
 - Wetland conservation, and promoting Tantramar as a Wetlands City
 - Green energy projects like municipal solar panels, energy retrofits of municipal buildings, conducting GHG audits and releasing public reports
 - Restrict the cutting of mature trees on residential properties
 - Reduce use of Town of Tantramar vehicles
 - Create cooling and warming centres for residents
 - Support for local food production and access
 - Sustainability experts for speakers series
 - Share non-profit sustainability information
 - Solar energy for municipal buildings
 - Support for Rural Rides
 - Food-sharing and community gardens
 - Support for homeowners seeking to climate-proof their homes
 - Trail network planning
 - Wind and solar farms near Sackville
 - Gate control system at mouth of Tantramar River
 - Education on waste management
 - Collaborate with grocery stores to reduce plastic waste
 - Removal of invasive species on trails and in Waterfowl Park
 - Clean up illegal dumps
 - Sewage Treatment facility is badly needed
- In contrast, the online survey, made up of mainly working respondents, had a slightly different list of priorities, with Watershed/Aquifer protections topping the list and Renewable Energy landing near the bottom. Local Food Production and Biodiversity/Conservation were still top 3 issues, while Climate-Proofing Infrastructure was still relatively popular with this group.

Services

- Respondents were asked to rank a selection of municipal service areas in terms of how important each area was to them. With a caveat that all areas of municipal are important and depend, to some degree, on each other, we note that the priorities for the community were remarkably similar across all sessions. It should be noted that not all of these services are directly within the jurisdiction of the municipality. Nevertheless, they are important to residents.
 - **Health, Water, Fire, and Policing** services were considered the most important by respondents at all sessions. Essentially, issues affecting a person's immediate physical health and well-being are key and are often considered to be the bedrock of what municipalities offer to residents.
 - **Recreation, Garbage/Recycling, Community and Cultural Facilities** were ranked in the middle while **Libraries, Disability Services, Snow Clearing,** and **Tourism and Economic Development** were ranked of lowest importance.
 - Some comments and suggestions were collected from respondents on how to improve these services, and they shed some light on why some services may be ranked higher or lower based on their political priorities:
 - **Fire:** Build a new fire hall in Dorchester; Develop a home fire safety kit and educate public on fire prevention; Hold landlords to account for fire code violations/unsafe conditions; Develop a public database rating building fire safety; Continue improving rural service; Forest fire preparedness; fire hydrant maintenance; Bring all departments together with full-time staff; Medical First Responders in Sackville and Point de Bute, like in Dorchester; Management training for Chiefs;
 - **Water:** Programming and rebates to reduce water use; Public location for stating water levels; Water system education; More sewage, stream, and lake testing; Protect or relocate sewage lagoons; Planning for emergency failures; Reopen Water St Spring; Water infrastructure for indigenous communities; More retention ponds to mitigate storm surge and flooding; Education on how the water system operates; Regular maintenance reporting; Better and broader water service outside Sackville; Public tours of water facilities; Disease tracking in wastewater.
 - **Health:** 24/7 hospital service in Sackville; Attract more medical professionals of all kinds; Move to a community care/clinic model instead of family doctor model; Public transportation to healthcare options; Promote healthcare volunteer groups; Strategic Health Services Plan; Fund the rural Health Action Group to assist; Separate place for seniors and disabled to call in prescriptions
 - **Policing:** Better police visibility; Social workers and other professionals for wellness checks and mental health care; Supports for police interacting with vulnerable communities; Regular policing reports; Expansion of policing (hiring officers); Better enforcement for speeding and noise violations; Anti-bias training for officers; Manage high levels of petty crime; Community Policing and Engagement; Reduce ATVs on roads; Public police reports and stats; Overnight police presence.
 - **Recreation:** Build bike lanes and infrastructure; Need parks/pools outside population hubs; More multi-purpose indoor spaces; Develop plan for linking trail system; outdoor rink in Sackville; More adult and teen team sports/recreation available; Off-leash dog park; Public gym; Youth leadership development; Pedways; Properly surface tennis courts; Better maintenance of existing facilities; Proper arena seating; Handrails and benches in parks.
 - **Garbage/Recycling:** Curbside recycling; Glass recycling; More local composting; Services and compliance for apartment complexes; mobile recycling depot; Bulk garbage collection; Build a local transfer station; Deal with unsightly premises; Need a green stream in addition to clear and blue; High level of positive comments from public on garbage/recycling.

- **Community and Cultural Facilities:** Central location/portal for community events; Upgrade town calendar; Multi-purpose community centre with space for arts organizations, food bank, hall rentals, and resource centre; Re-open Dorchester Office; Preservation and restoration of Vogue Theatre; Heritage and cultural by-laws/protections; Regular town halls with Mayor and Council; Farmer's Market needs an indoor location and more events; More support for community groups; More indigenous connection in events; Fund the food bank; More support for Sappyfest and other arts orgs; Make use of the HMCS Sackville;
- **Snow Clearing:** Snow clearing in the evening and on some trails; Include sidewalks and parking lots in clearing, and ensure equipment is properly sized; Enable volunteers to assist in snow clearing; help for seniors/disabled to clear snow; Walkable sidewalks in winter; Less salt, more sand; Better rural coverage; Look into electric plowing options when feasible; High level of positive comments from public on snow clearing.
- **Disability Services:** Maintain and fix sidewalks for mobility-aid users; Host public events only at accessible locations; Ensure curbs are designed for accessibility; Support Nursing Home Without Walls; Transportation options; More public bathrooms; Meals to disabled and elderly; Scent-free municipal zones; Collaboration with mental health NGOs; Clearly label food at events for allergens; Disability equipment rentals; Make ramps available to businesses; More handicap parking; Engage local businesses on the needs of their customers;
- **Libraries:** Include games, movies, tools, recreation equipment, etc. in libraries; Intergenerational programs for skill/knowledge sharing; Upgrade Sackville library interior; Use libraries more for municipal events; Better library promotion; Support Mount Allison library renovations; Offer downtown wifi; Libraries need more funding in general; More worker-friendly library hours; More public computers available; Local tutoring and ESL programming; Library could be a senior hub and daycare; Sackville library needs a photocopier and accessible basement. Dorchester needs a bigger space; More variety of books;
- **Tourism & Economic Development:** Create Economic Development plan; Climate resilient home and business model; Further develop local identity centred on natural assets and sustainability; Grants for businesses to meet a new heritage code; Transportation for tourists; Tourism signs on highway about RAMSAR and UNESCO heritage site; Promote world-class wetlands and cultural capital; Increase places for visitors to stay; Make Tantramar a Registered Bird-Friendly town; Develop a local purchasing policy; Form a Chamber of Commerce; Consider regional Ec Dev; Bring in more employers.
- Online respondents showed the exact same ordering of priorities.

Municipal Areas

Residents were asked to select their Top 3 most important areas of municipal responsibility, and the results varied only slightly across sessions.

In line with findings from the Municipal Services section, **Public Safety and Emergency Services** tops the list as the most important topic, with **18.5%** of all respondents.

Infrastructure Construction and Maintenance comes in second at **17.5%**, with **Parks, Trails, and Recreation** in third at **16%**.

Arts, Culture, and Heritage, Economic Development, Resident Services, Community Festivals and Events, were all middling (**10-13%**), while **Employment Services (2.5%)** and **Business Services (1%)** ranked last.

Some variation observed across sessions included high marks for Arts, Culture and Heritage in Sackville (19.5%), and significant votes in support of Infrastructure Construction and Maintenance (23%) and Public Safety and Emergency Services (21%) in Dorchester, indicating some area-specific priorities.

Online survey responses followed the same trends, with Public Safety and Emergency Services at the top, followed by Infrastructure Construction and Maintenance and Parks, Trails and Recreation. Economic Development, Resident Services, and Arts, Culture and Heritage were middling, with Business Services, Employment Services, and Community Festivals and Events near the bottom.

Municipal Infrastructure

Residents were asked for their levels of satisfaction on a variety of municipal infrastructure options. The responses reflect many of the themes we have observed in the consultations so far:

- **Water and Sewer** consistently scored the highest at each session, with **Trails and Parks** in second.
- **The Visitor Information Centre (VIC)** was generally highly rated, mainly in the Sackville/Sackville-adjacent sessions where residents have the easiest access. The VIC was lower rated in Dorchester, where residents may have more trouble accessing the VIC
- **Storm and Wastewater Infrastructure** scored middling, likely due to indifference/invisibility of those investiture elements.
- **Roads, Sidewalks, and Public Transportation** scored lower, with **Public Transportation** in particular very low-ranked. Sidewalks and roads were perceived most negatively in Dorchester.
- In general, outdoor and recreation spaces were praised, while transportation infrastructure was criticized.

Online responses largely agreed with in-person responses, with high marks for the VIC, Water, Sewer, Trails and Parks, and Recreation Facilities, while Roads, Sidewalks and Public Transportation fill out the bottom of the list.

Communications

Residents were first asked to rate how informed they felt about the work of the municipality.

- Residents generally do not feel informed about the work of the municipality, with **41.5% indicating a lack of information**, and only **28.6% saying they felt somewhat informed**. 29% felt neutral, while nearly nobody felt totally informed (2%).
- These numbers are approximately equal across sessions, with 4 in 10 feeling uninformed, 4 in 10 feeling neutral, and 3 in 10 feeling somewhat informed.
- Engaging with the municipality is ultimately a personal decision, and so efforts to meet residents where they are in terms of communication are key.
- Numbers from the online survey are complimentary, with **45% saying they feel uninformed**, **11% neutral**, and **44% saying they feel informed**. Notably, online respondents were more likely to say they were informed than neutral, indicating a preference of this group to engage online.

Residents were also asked for their opinions on methods of communication between the municipality and residents, with several options presented to respondents, who selected their preferred methods, and offered ideas for other communications methods.

- Residents generally preferred **Email (33.3%)**, **Social Media/Facebook (29%)** and **Delivered Mail (29%)** for communicating with the town. Texting was not popular (10%), and automated calls were roundly rejected (0%)
- Some residents were wary of using social media for official communications, while others wanted physical mail outs to focus only on big things in Tantramar; newsletters and regular updates appear better suited for email/social media than mail-outs.
- Many residents felt that an integrated communications plan that made maximal use of the Town website was the best path forward. Using all communications materials to point residents to a robust website was a popular idea.
- Online respondents were more likely to prefer **Email (52%)** compared to **Social Media (25%)** and **Delivered Mail (15%)**, with Text (8%) and Automated Calls (0%) still at the bottom. This preference for email reflects the fact that many online respondents are currently working, and engage regularly with their email.

Finally, residents were asked for their ideas on how the municipality can best engage with them:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Residents want a mechanism to present ideas/issues and get action • A feedback box that is always available • An advertised number/email/address to ask about town plans and have questions and answers published • Make Tantramar an at-large voting system, instead of wards • Have an easy-to-access page online with budget and financial information for residents • Councillors should attend the Farmer's Market • Municipality could improve regular public comms online, and advertising for public events • Newsletter mailouts x times per year • Invite questions during Council meetings • Surveys are good, radio, print are useful too • Transparency is key; sense that community is not in the loop on Council decisions • These community sessions have been a strong effort and were well done • Councillors should go door to door | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue having public meetings outside of Town Hall, and rotate public meetings throughout the community • Establish Standing Advisory Committees with resident involved • Postal mail-outs for important matters • More opportunities for resident involvement at Council meetings • Better collaboration with Mount Allison • More public consultations • Use a variety of communications tools to reach all residents • Local media is dying, and the municipality could fill that news gap for residents • Roundtables and committees should be open to the public • Dorchester residents question why there is no Councillor in Dorchester proper • Upgrade and regularly maintain the website • Citizen working groups • Funding for Renaissance Sackville projects • Address negative comments on social media |
|--|---|

Housing

Residents were asked about their views on housing in Tantramar and answered questions about their personal housing situation.

85% of respondents own their homes, while 15% rent. These numbers were similar across all sessions. Most respondents, being homeowners, did not view housing as a major barrier to living in Tantramar (58%), although the number of people naming it “the most significant barrier” (13.3%) was approximately the same as the number of renters, indicating a need for rental options in the community (15%). Although most respondents were homeowners, there is an awareness of the difficulty in finding housing in the current market, with 42% naming it a barrier of some kind

Online respondent demographics were similar, with 88% owning their home and 12% renting. Forty three percent (43%) say housing is not a barrier, while 30% say it is a barrier. The number of respondents saying it is a significant barrier (11%) corresponds closely to the number of renters (12%), which is seen from the in-person responses as well.

Respondents were also asked for ideas on specific housing initiatives they would like to see:

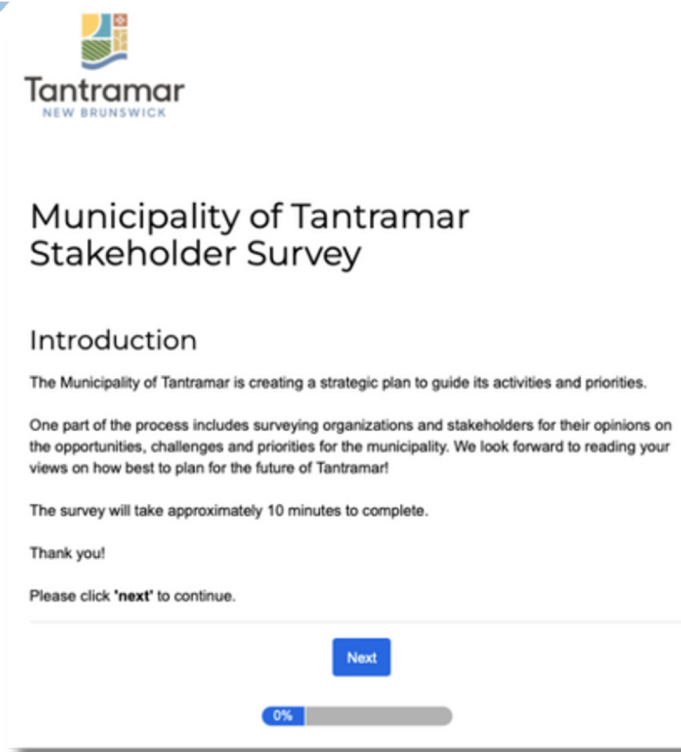
- Sustainable, affordable, green housing was a popular idea, built with ecological materials, in low environmental impact locations
- Rezoning to add more housing
- Small townhouse/row house projects
- Encouraging solar energy for new constructions
- Creating an inventory of available land and available rentals
- Developing Senior/Youth co-op housing programs
- Contract regularly for a housing needs assessment
- Develop a heritage code for new builds
- Build affordable public housing
- Densify housing builds
- Rent/Price controls
- More diversity in housing economics (reduce monopolies)
- Develop standard, accessible designs
- Independent retirement communities
- Simplify and accelerate process for building starter homes
- Provide whatever land and resources the municipality has to reduce the cost of building affordable units
- Municipal Housing Strategy
- Limit apartment buildings if it means destroying heritage buildings
- Develop another area like Marshwinds
- Block “reno-victions”
- A well-organized trailer park with rates and maintenance

One Big Thing

To finish the consultation, we asked residents: What would be the One Big Thing that Council could do to improve the community of Tantramar? This question is an opportunity to capture ideas that may not have been offered previously, to ground truth ideas that have been raised, and to check against priorities indicated in earlier questions.

- Think big, think outside the box, and work together
- Don't forget about the local experts right here in Tantramar
- Bring back Council Advisory Committees
- Hold individual councillors accountable for their actions
- Municipality-wide standardized climate adaptation projects
- Internships to help people get into jobs that support the municipality
- Be advocates for reducing GHG emissions and encouraging nature-based solutions/projects
- Hire a Climate Change Coordinator
- Expand speaking time for residents at Council meetings
- Build a performing arts centre
- Develop heritage preservation bylaws and heritage codes for buildings
- Create an integrated transportation plan
- Municipal doctor recruitment
- Promote industry for future generations
- More collaboration with Mount Allison University
- Re-open the Dorchester Office
- Ensure all parts of the municipality are supported, not just the population hubs
- Develop affordable housing
- More sports and organized activities
- 24/7 healthcare access
- Communicate with individual wards as much as possible
- A youth drop-in space that is safe for everyone
- Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion - interrelated with Accessibility
- Incorporate climate action into all municipal decisions
- More focus on areas outside of Sackville

Stakeholder Engagement



7

Interviews

18

Survey Respondents

Another element of the engagement was feedback from select stakeholders. We primarily conducted in-person interviews. However, for those stakeholders that were unable to engage in-person, we created a survey to collect their input.

Stakeholders who completed the survey were asked for their level of satisfaction with their working relationship with the municipality. **Sixty six percent reported being satisfied or very satisfied**, while **33% were neutral with no negative responses**.

Next, stakeholders were asked for the Opportunities and Challenges they see down the line for the municipality:

Opportunities	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on improving healthcare in the community, including physician recruitment • Community performance space • Tourism and Heritage are essential and seemingly not really on the Town’s radar • Need a comprehensive housing strategy • Preservation of Tantramar’s historical resources • Restore the rail trail as a walking/biking venue • Develop an Active Transportation Plan and a Trails Plan • Become an “Age-Friendly” Community • Promote community identity for tourism and economic development • Lean into “Sackville – Cultural Capital of Canada” • High density housing in downtown and car-free space in same • More and better roadways • Promote and assist in developing an independent news and information vehicle • Deeper relationship with Mt Allison • Ec Dev Plan • Improve public transit • Credit businesses and stakeholders for the money they bring in 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need staff and Council to go to bat for residents • Climate change and infrastructure • No longer a live performance venue here • Resources for business development to meet the opportunities identified • Better community engagement • Housing and healthcare are essential • Secure adequate funding for even distribution of municipal services and resources now contained in the boundaries of Tantramar • Stigma towards ATVs is challenging, and not earned • Devising a brand and positioning Tantramar as a success story for other municipalities • Unregulated landlords • Loss of cultural assets • Marketing plan for wetlands, culture, heritage, and arts

Stakeholders also provided insight into areas of potential collaboration between their organizations and the municipality:

- Sharing resources
- Waterfowl Park requires an inventory of all the assets and resources available to them, and the development of an expanded vision on how to protect them
- Allocate more funding to culture and heritage
- Assist in developing an Arts Strategy, along with more financial support. Town is helpful with in-kind support
- Facilitate the construction of a new performing arts centre
- Form a trails committee with community membership to provide guidance to Town for trail maintenance, use, and development.
- Road use agreements for ATVs and recreational vehicles



In terms of existing collaboration with Tantramar, stakeholders were largely satisfied, with **50% either somewhat or very satisfied**, **37.5% neutral**, and **12.5% dissatisfied**. There is more work to be done on collaboration, but Tantramar is creating a solid base of partnerships.

Stakeholders also provided their views on how Tantramar should be different in 10 years. Some suggestions include:


- Continue to be progressive, multicultural, and age-friendly
- A community that attracts people from all over the country with a sustainable marketing plan

Finally, we have included additional comments that arose over the course of our conversations with stakeholders that we found were not captured elsewhere:

Big Opportunities:

- Build between Sackville and Dorchester
- Micro-credentialing work with community college
- Coastline development
- Slowly develop a “Tantramar” identity instead of “Sackville”, “Dorchester”, etc
- More retail options
- Economic Development and Tourism need significant work
- Focus on existing opportunities
- All consultations should require a student element and develop a student committee in the municipality
- Develop student internships with town and local orgs; Need long-term funding opportunities municipality-wide
- Community engagement is crucial, and the biggest issues are not municipal issues (Health, Housing) so engagement is key
- Dorchester Fire is happy to remain volunteer, while Sackville Fire wants a composite, professional, full-time fire department

Big Challenges:

- Politics and in-fighting
 - Finding tradespeople and companies to do work
 - Harsh building codes
 - Municipal Communication
 - Food insecurity
 - Perceptions of fairness across former municipal boundaries
 - People don’t really understand how municipal taxation works
 - Sewer management is in a flood plain – needs to be managed
 - Industrial park is almost full – also in a flood plain
 - Not a whole lot of places for Ec Dev to happen here
 - Residents don’t necessarily understand how each fire department is run and how they’re different
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Contact Us

 Website

www.tantramarconnect.ca