



What We
Heard Report
HOUSING

JUNE 2019





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Housing
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Project Lunenburg
Town of Lunenburg Comprehensive Plan

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This report was prepared by Upland Planning and Design.

What We Did

As part of Project Lunenburg and the development of a Comprehensive Community Plan, the Project Team along with the community and its stakeholders explored housing issues and opportunities. Housing was examined as an individual topic but also as part of a larger discussion about the future of Lunenburg. The Project Team collected feedback and information related to housing through five activities in the spring of 2019.

A community workshop was held at the Town firehall in April. Community members and other stakeholders discussed housing concerns and opportunities. Over 140 people were in attendance.

An online survey was open for five weeks from April to June 2019, and gathered input on personal housing experiences and priorities for the future. The 15-question survey resulted in 255 responses, reflecting the experiences and opinions of a variety of local resident households and other interested individuals. The housing survey was available to local and nearby residents, as well as other interested participants. The survey was promoted in power bills to all Town residents as well as through the project website, Facebook page and email list, and advertised through the workshop event and on posters around town.

Additional information for this report was gathered through:

- ▶ 30 of 271 online comments placed on the participatory map through Social Pinpoint
- ▶ (an earlier general online survey (the Project Lunenburg Individual Survey) with 262 respondents
- ▶ a youth focus group on housing with 4 participants



This What We Heard Report is the second in a series of ten that provides summaries of public insight on topics addressed through Project Lunenburg. The first What We Heard Report detailed findings of the Lunenburg individual survey, and those general findings are referred to throughout this paper alongside findings about housing specifically. This compilation of comments and discussions will guide the comprehensive plan and create a vision for the future of housing in Lunenburg.

Who Was Involved

Survey Respondents

The housing survey received a total of 255 responses. Looking just at the respondents that currently live within the Town of Lunenburg, 167 responses were received, representing over 7% of the total town population. A third of local resident respondents have lived in the town for over 20 years, and over 74% are full-time homeowners. Looking at the remaining responses, about a quarter came from people living within a 10-minute drive of the town, and 9% do not live in the area but have another connection to the town.

Demographic data collected as part of the survey helps us to understand where gaps exist in the results, and which groups should be targeted for future engagement. Looking at age and gender, the survey shows an underrepresentation of youth and older seniors, while women and people aged 55 to 74 are overrepresented.

Two and four-person households are overrepresented as well, while there is a significant gap in single-person households. Survey respondents are skewed towards moderate incomes between \$45,000 and \$89,999, while low-income households under \$24,999 are lacking, possibly related to underrepresentation of youth and older seniors.

Demographic information on household size and income may not be completely representative, as some households are likely represented more than once in this survey. Nevertheless, similar to the initial survey for Project Lunenburg, the conclusions suggest that these results do not fully reflect the views and experiences of youth and older seniors, as well as low-income and single-person households.

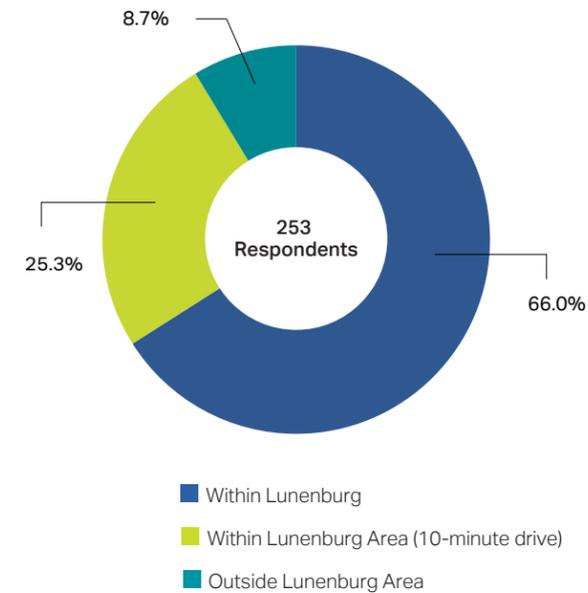


Figure 1: Survey Respondents' Place of Residence

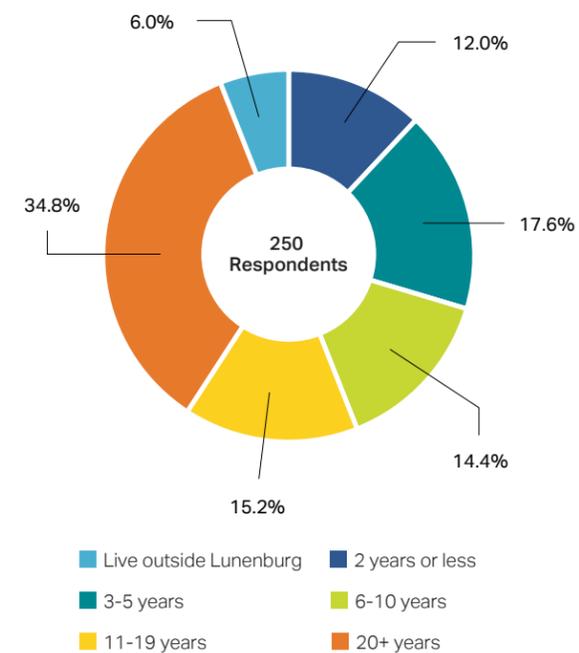


Figure 2: Length of time survey respondents have lived in the Town of Lunenburg

These results present the themes identified through all engagement platforms, while quantitative data originates from housing survey responses. Housing was the number one issue throughout early Project Lunenburg engagement. Half of survey respondents believe it is very difficult to find housing in Lunenburg, and 34% believe it is somewhat difficult. While many comments centered around the barriers to housing in Lunenburg, when asked what were some of the greatest opportunities for the town in the next 20 years, a quarter of responses mentioned housing. This potential is discussed in the form of affordability, short-term rental oversight, co-housing and other alternative housing models, accessibility and environmental sustainability.

The following section presents details of the primary themes, and an analysis of vulnerable groups, focusing on the community's concerns around housing for young people and families, seniors, and low-income households. This discussion also analyzes survey results of respondents within these demographics, examining key issues for each.

A discussion of these results builds on the consultation findings, and looks at housing gaps and opportunities in the Town of Lunenburg. It also provides broader context and makes some high-level recommendations for ways the Comprehensive Plan could address opportunities and concerns.

Across all engagement platforms, responses were analyzed and grouped by theme. Primary themes with the greatest volume of responses are listed here and explored further. While six themes are presented in this report, these discussions are deeply intertwined and together form the complex narrative of housing in Lunenburg.

Affordability

Throughout the engagements on housing (including the workshop and survey) residents expressed a desire for a greater diversity of housing options that are affordable to households of all incomes, suitable to all ages and abilities, and of good quality. Affordability came up throughout each of the six key themes, and in the initial Project Lunenburg survey, 34% of respondents felt that the cost of living is a challenge in Lunenburg, while 23% felt the variety of housing was an issue. Participants urged that while tourism is an important industry for the town, this comprehensive plan should consider residents' needs first.

When current renters in the Town of Lunenburg were asked to identify challenges they had faced in securing appropriate housing, the number one concern was the lack of options, followed by difficulty affording rent, and limited lease periods. In contrast, the top three concerns for current home owners were difficulty paying property taxes, difficulty accessing amenities without a car, and homes that need major maintenance or repairs. This shows that affordability is a major concern for both tenures, though renters are also having trouble simply finding an available place to live. Anecdotally, there is an emerging trend of households renting housing elsewhere in the region, while all other aspects of their lives are in Lunenburg (extended family, child care, employment, recreation).

Among survey respondents anticipating changes to their household in the coming five years, the top responses were renovations or upgrades, downsizing, and moving out of Lunenburg. All these results point to a serious gap in the housing supply, which in some cases could be causing residents to look elsewhere for a place to live.

Top Challenges for Renters

- 1 Lack of rental options
- 2 Unaffordable
- 3 Limited lease

Top Challenges for Owners

- 1 Difficulty paying property taxes
- 2 Poor walkability
- 3 Property in need of maintenance

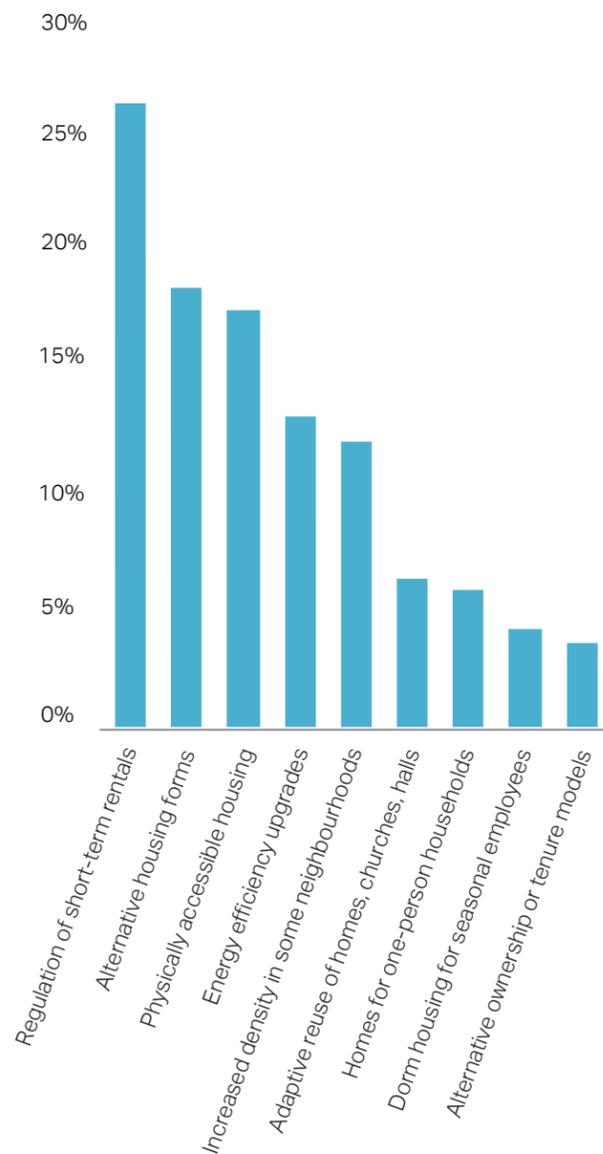


Figure 3: Preferred approaches to improving the affordability or availability of housing

Participants felt almost unanimously that the town has a lack of suitable and affordable long-term rentals. As a town with a strong tourism sector, Lunenburg transforms in the summer and many rental units become short-term rentals for visitors. Paired with the influx of seasonal workers, the warmer months are difficult for many renters. Participants cited employees who cannot find a place to live in Lunenburg, and opt instead for long commutes. Workshop discussions raised the idea for a rental inventory, with additional organizing available to match home-share owners and tenants. Participants suggested that it may be necessary to provide incentives for landlords to provide rental properties, whether financial or otherwise, as well as improved standards and enforcement of rental housing quality.

Housing was the most discussed topic on the participatory map, and users voiced recommendations for locating a new multi-unit development which could contain rental housing and condos. Regardless of tenure, there is debate about whether new housing developments are suited to the waterfront as well as the Blockhouse Hill. Some identified their support for mid-rise, mixed use housing and infill development within Old Town. The heritage character and designation of Lunenburg homes is greatly valued by residents, though some worry it may be too restrictive for developers or home owners struggling to maintain or adapt their property. A few survey respondents felt particular affinity for contemporary developments which complement the heritage aspects of the town, showcasing the architectural evolution of Lunenburg homes.

Some comments focused on local governance, suggesting that Town leaders could take initiative in housing, and be open to new ideas and innovative collaboration. Respondents advocated for regulations which respond to developing trends and allow flexibility in housing, providing the framework necessary for an affordable and diverse housing stock. Some participants noted the usefulness of continuous data collection and analysis that monitors important indicators to properly understand the local housing need over time.

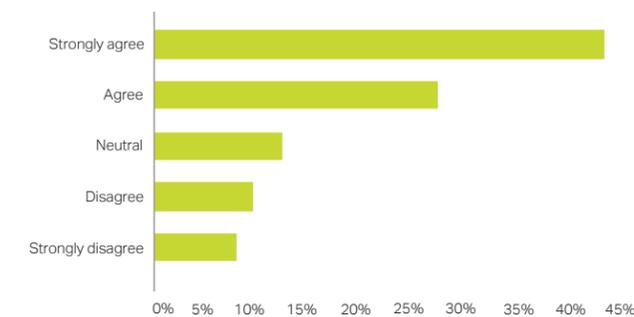


Figure 4: Opinion: require health & safety inspections

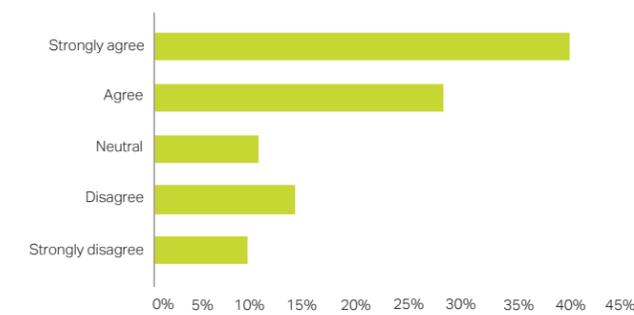


Figure 5: Opinion: require registration of full homes or apartments

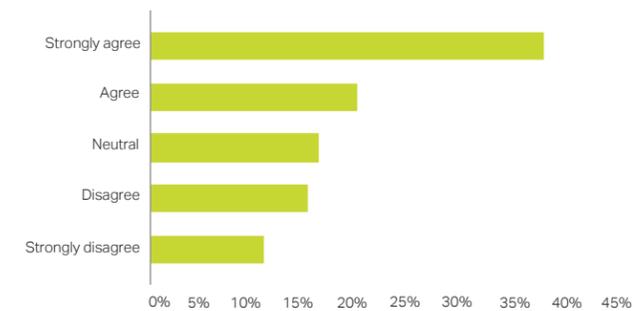


Figure 6: Opinion: limit the number of units operated by one host

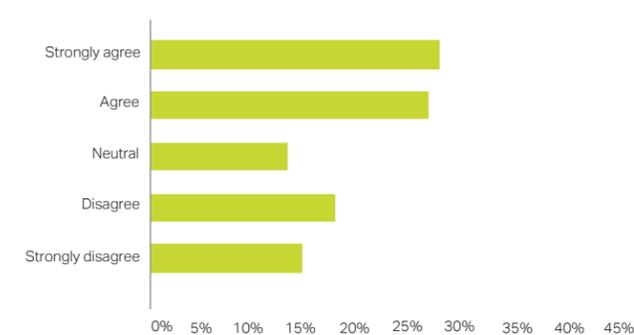


Figure 7: Opinion: require registration of single rooms in a home

Short-Term Rentals

Following affordability, the short-term rental market was the second most discussed theme throughout the engagements. Short-term rentals like those advertised on Airbnb or Home Away can boost tourism, but they are also viewed as a threat to the local accommodations industry. When survey respondents were asked to rank their preferred approaches to the improvement of housing availability and affordability, the majority (27%) selected regulation of short-term rentals as their first priority, but with 13% selecting this as their lowest priority, there was some divergence on this topic.

Though there were many conflicting thoughts about short-term rentals in the town, most participants felt it is important to balance both the costs and benefits of this housing phenomenon. There was a belief among respondents that short-term rentals enable affordable homeownership for some by providing a supplementary income as they either rent out a room regularly or their full house during vacations. On the other hand, responses indicated that much of this housing stock could also be a valuable source of long-term rental in a community where residents feel it is hard to come by.

Workshop participants generally felt that the troubling issue was not hosts renting out their primary residences or private rooms, but secondary residences and summer vacation homes not occupied by local residents. In order to manage these secondary residences in particular, workshop participants were interested in exploring regulatory options. A few short-term rental hosts also participated in the engagements, saying that their units are housing stock which would not otherwise be available for long term rental due to the poor suitability of the design or owners' personal comfort. Some participants echoed this, noting that Lunenburg's affordable housing issue did not begin with Airbnb, and emphasized the need to incentivize new long-term rental units.

One survey question asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement with 11 different short-term rental regulation strategies. Options that respondents most agreed upon were:

- Require health and safety inspections
- Registration for rental of full homes or apartments
- Limit the number of properties rented by one host

Some also showed interest in requiring the registration of single rooms in a home, though there was strong divergence on this option. While regulation of secondary or primary residences were not preferred options in the survey, it was the focus of many workshop discussions. The strategies respondents showed the least interest in were limiting the number of days per year a property can be rented, applying a tourist tax onto nightly fees, and limiting the number of rooms listed within one property.

Co-housing & Other Alternative Models

Co-housing was one of the most discussed housing topics at the workshop and the most popular form of alternative housing in the survey. There is great interest in this model among residents, though some felt the current regulations are too strict to allow innovative forms of housing development. Workshop participants described a vision of a co-housing development consisting of dense clustered units of smaller energy efficient homes. Participants discussed possible dwelling types for this type of development, including pre-fabricated homes, tiny homes, laneway housing, secondary suites or separate units within larger single-detached dwellings. Participants felt it would be important to look to other Nova Scotian examples in order to create an affordable, multi-generational co-housing model appropriate for the Lunenburg context. Some individuals and local organizations have already begun looking into this possibility.

Workshop participants indicated that there would need to be support from the Town to guide a co-housing planning process and assist with infrastructure and servicing. Financial support would likely come from all levels of government, but the Town can create clear and permissive regulations which facilitate making co-housing a reality.

Primary Themes

(Continued)

Multi-generational housing, including home share programming, was cited as one opportunity to support seniors not only socially but also physically and economically. Home shares around Canada help to pair home owners with tenants to rent a spare room, often offering discounted rents in exchange for an agreed level of support. It was also noted that shared housing does not suit everyone, and is not a substitute for whole-home long-term rentals. Some participants wondered if there may also be a need for rooming or boarding houses in the town which could support low-income households or seasonal employees. The survey showed little interest in dorm housing for these workers, though this platform may not have captured the demographic for whom it would be relevant.

Additional interest in co-operative housing development, land trusts, rent-to-own options and secondary suites reinforced the support for alternative housing models.

Accessibility

Survey respondents and workshop participants felt that physically accessible dwellings and one-storey homes are needed to support the town's aging population, particularly seniors that are looking to downsize. Accessibility benefits anyone with a permanent or temporary disability, and makes housing more comfortable and flexible for all current or future residents. Responses showed interest in new developments which make use of universal design concepts, saving time and funds on retrofitting down the road.

Densification and infill could increase the supply of housing in Lunenburg and allow population growth, but it can also ensure new and existing amenities are in close proximity to housing. Residents strongly value the walkability of this community, and being able to walk to everyday necessities makes housing more affordable and accessible. The survey showed some argument over the concept of increased housing density, though there was no discussion of what types of density were in question, or to what extent.

Respondents placed an emphasis on protecting existing open space, and some mentioned the possibility of housing paired with shared spaces for residents (similar to the co-housing concept).

Supportive housing programs provide affordable housing with built in healthcare or social supports, and some workshop participants mentioned the value of encouraging this housing model. Supportive housing is often aimed at low-income households or people who have trouble securing housing, and can provide supports related to drug use and addictions, physical or cognitive disabilities, and mental illness. Small options homes are community homes which provide in-home support typically for three or more people with disabilities, a housing type which is not currently available in Lunenburg.

Environmental Sustainability

Participants were enthusiastic about moving away from traditional energy, towards more efficient options. Throughout the engagements there was much excitement about the possibilities of both active and passive solar energy in Lunenburg. Individuals expressed a desire for net-zero housing, which produces at least as much energy as it consumes, and added that this could be possible through innovations in wind and solar. The engagements showed an interest in both building codes and heritage designations which adapt to accommodate green building techniques, and some residents have questions about how this will affect heritage designation.

Some participants commented on the need to examine the impacts of sea level rise on both infrastructure and housing. Storms, flooding and erosion will continue to have major impacts on existing and future housing stock, so participants felt regulations which adapt to future water levels and protect residents is crucial.

Young People & Families

Among survey respondents under 35, household sizes were larger, as many young families fall within this age bracket. In contrast to the full survey sample, this demographic had fewer homeowners, though the distribution among income brackets was similar.

There was a strong feeling that if Lunenburg is to grow or avoid becoming solely a tourist community, it will need to attract young families and individuals. The aging population will require additional supports, amenities and healthcare, all of which must come with working age people willing to live in or commute to Lunenburg. Experiences with young people moving away or turning down Lunenburg jobs due to lack of suitable year-round housing were concerning for many residents. Anecdotally, some young homeowners and prospective buyers are concerned with the perceived recent surge in the listing price of homes.

While younger survey respondents were not as concerned about the limited lease periods in Lunenburg rentals, higher proportions of younger people face challenges with the affordability and availability of rentals, issues that many participants felt disproportionately affect young people. This demographic was more likely to have difficulty paying property taxes and utilities (as echoed across engagement platforms) though maintenance costs were less of a concern, as young home owners have often only recently purchased their homes.

As young home owners tend to have families, none were in search of a smaller housing option, and there was less interest in both accessibility and alternative housing models. More young renters are concerned with the walkability of their neighbourhoods, and have difficulties accessing amenities without a car.

Workshop participants suggested lower property taxes and waiving the deed transfer tax could help first time buyers in purchasing a house. Rent-to-own options could also lessen this gap, and many participants showed support for this option.

Seniors

Housing survey respondents over 65 had smaller household sizes and larger proportions of home ownership. Seniors were underrepresented in the upper income groups (over \$85,000), while households making between \$25,000 and \$34,999 and between \$65,000 and 84,999 were overrepresented.

Survey results show that accessibility is an important issue for seniors, and respondents felt that financial assistance for accessible retrofits and aging in place could be a major boon to seniors in Lunenburg. Some participants were concerned about the restrictions heritage designations may place on the affordability of maintenance in general, and accessibility creates another layer of difficulty. Responses showed a desire for new or renovated homes which are single-storey and of universal design, to help bridge the gap since the majority of homes are two-storey dwellings. A few participants noted a need for pet friendly buildings, particularly for senior renters wanting to stay active.

While fewer seniors felt that it is difficult to find housing, this age group may simply have fewer recent movers, considering the high proportion of home ownership. In contrast to younger respondents, the survey shows more seniors in need of a smaller housing option, while fewer faced difficulties paying property taxes. Although many senior respondents were hoping to downsize, significantly fewer were considering moving out of Lunenburg when compared with the full sample. This indicates a need for new housing within Lunenburg that is smaller, accessible and walkable.

Low-income Households

Low-income households, for this report defined as households earning \$44,999 or less, are most vulnerable to housing poverty. Although it is estimated that households would need to earn at least \$51,160 to afford the average mortgage in Lunenburg, survey respondents in this category were evenly split between renters and homeowners. Low-income respondents consisted of more individuals living alone and fewer large households, and both young people and seniors were overrepresented in this category. Reflecting national trends, respondents identifying as women were more likely to be low-income (though the full survey sample size also showed an overrepresentation of women).

The main challenges faced by both tenure types were cost-related. Across all income groups, renters' key challenge was a lack of options, though more low-income respondents faced issues with unaffordable rent and utilities. Low-income owners also have difficulty paying utilities, and a high proportion have properties needing repairs. Similar to senior respondents, and reflective of the small household sizes of both these groups, many low-income households are hoping to downsize. As anticipated, low-income respondents were more likely to find the search for housing very difficult, and were particularly in favour of improvements which addressed housing for single-person households and accessible housing.

This community engagement heard from a range of residents, primarily from the Town of Lunenburg but also from the broader region. Participants advocated for a diversity of housing options within reach of all residents. Individuals showed support for a local government that is proactive on housing and that facilitates flexibility and collaboration among all sectors.

While affordability is a concern for both owners and renters, housing availability is primarily a rental issue. In Lunenburg the seasonality of rentals is paired with the seasonality of tourism and employment, creating a rush for summer housing. Participants recommended rental inventories, home share programs and long-term rental incentives for landlords which could help take the pressure off this housing market. Looking at the survey responses of lower-income households, any new affordable rental developments should also provide adequate supply for individuals living alone, and those with accessibility requirements.

Young adult and senior home owners are most likely to face affordability issues. Young people in Lunenburg struggle with paying property taxes and utility bills, so interventions that address affordable home ownership like rent-to-own could assist with some of these barriers. Senior home owners, on the other hand, face challenges paying for maintenance and repairs, so participants suggested financial assistance programs to support both older residents and the aging housing stock.

Heritage properties continue to draw many residents and tourists to the town, and there is no debate about the value of this built heritage, though many participants showed concern about the adaptability of heritage properties in the face of changing trends. Participants want to know how increased flexibility of heritage protection provisions could have the potential to improve affordability, particularly for senior home owners having difficulties covering the costs of maintenance and major repairs. There is a desire in the community to balance heritage conservation with new housing development, increased demand for renewable energy sources, and accessible housing.

Short-term rentals are one housing form that can enable affordable home ownership and bolster tourism, but they are also considered a threat to the availability of long-term rentals and the prosperity of traditional hospitality sectors. In order to balance these benefits and challenges, most participants agreed that some form of regulation is necessary, particularly for hosts renting out secondary residences. Survey participants responded positively to the possibility of requiring health and safety inspections, registration for the rental of full homes or apartments, and limiting the number of properties listed by one host, but there was some debate on the registration of single rooms in a home. Overall, participants felt it will be important for Lunenburg to put residents first, prioritizing housing over tourism accommodations.

Interest is piqued in multi-generational co-housing developments, particularly those which make use of alternative dwelling types like tiny homes and secondary suites. Clear, permissive regulations are needed to support this type of development and make the process simple for prospective residents. Home share, co-operative housing, land trusts and other models were also a main topic of discussion.

Housing models like supportive units and developments which incorporate shared open spaces or retirement-friendly options can also improve the accessibility of a community. Housing which is dense, walkable and close to amenities addresses not only physical and social accessibility but also environmental sustainability.

Other ways participants talked about sustainability was related to renewable energy sources and climate change. Standards and regulations which encourage solar energy investments and protect homes and infrastructure from sea level rise impacts like flooding and erosion are top of mind.

Moving forward, the results of this engagement will be incorporated into housing policy and recommendations within the Town of Lunenburg's Comprehensive Plan.

Statistics Canada Census of Population, 2016.



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