

Town of Lunenburg

## Lawn standards to allow for naturalization

NOTES FROM THE FEB. 20 COMMUNITY CONVERSATION

On Feb. 20, 2024, the Town held a community conversation that brought 23 residents and three staff together to discuss topics and themes that could be incorporated into a minimum lawn standards bylaw that would allow for lawn naturalization. The community conversation was open to the public, but pre-registration was required.

Key themes revealed in the conversation are outlined below:

### **Should we have a by-law for this?**

Some comments were on whether this should be a policy, bylaw or something more informal. Staff believe a bylaw is best for establishing community standards or rules. Policies are typically for internal town operations and do not apply to the community as a whole. Informal guidelines could be subject to various interpretations and might leave us in a grey area when dealing with a complaint.

### **Defining “Naturalization” and “Unsightly”**

There was general consensus that the bylaw should not use “unsightly” as unsightliness is subjective. There was no consensus on how we define naturalization. Still, many participants expressed that naturalization should have clearly defined parameters and be created intentionally and maintained.

Some possible definitions for naturalization are below. **Do you have a preferred definition?**

- *Naturalization is an ecologically-based approach to landscape management that seeks to enhance biodiversity and ecological resilience in the urban landscape using native or non-invasive-adapted plant species, including flowering perennials, grasses, shrubs, and trees. Some naturalization projects may aim to create specific landscape types such as Acadian Forest, wetlands, meadows, and riparian areas.*
- *Naturalization is the process of reducing the amount of cultivated lawn in a yard and adding spaces that better represent the naturally occurring landscape of the region.*
- *Naturalized areas are areas where both natural growth and purposeful planting of both local and foreign plants are combined to create a natural space that is cared for by the owner.*
- *Managed Natural Landscape: a planned, intentional, and maintained planting of native or nonnative grasses, wildflowers, forbs, ferns, shrubs, or trees, including but not limited*

*to rain gardens, meadow vegetation, and ornamental plants. Managed natural landscapes do not include turf-grass lawns left unattended.*

Some of the group also expressed that beyond public safety concerns, there should not be any enforceable measures for the aesthetics of a naturalized area – aesthetics should not be regulated – and that trying to define what a garden is would be challenging as there are numerous types of gardens.

### **Invasive species and noxious weeds**

There was a consensus that invasive species and noxious weeds should not be planted and that properties experiencing issues with invasive species should try their best to remove or maintain them to prevent further growth. There was a consensus that requiring a property owner to remove an invasive species altogether might not be realistic, depending on the species and how far it has spread.

There was consensus that the bylaw be aligned with prohibiting noxious weeds as outlined in the Provincial [Weed Control Regulations](#) and invasive species as identified in the [Nova Scotia Invasive Species Council's Invasive Species in Nova Scotia Identification and Information Guide](#).

There were some concerns that Common Milkweed is a prohibited noxious weed per the Province. However, it was determined that Swamp Milkweed is not a prohibited noxious weed. Differentiating between the two species would be good information to include in any educational tools that may accompany the bylaw.

It was suggested that this rule, banning noxious weeds and invasive species, be enforced under a bylaw.

### **Limiting the height of turf grass**

There was consensus that the height of turf grass (traditional lawn) should be limited to 25 cm (almost 10 inches). There were some comments that there should be no height limit for any other vegetation, including within naturalized areas, provided the height and density of vegetation do not pose a risk to public safety. **Should there be a height limit within naturalized spaces?**

### **Pest Prevention**

There was some brief discussion of pest prevention, but no real consensus was achieved.

Staff recommend that, similarly to invasive species, property owners must proactively manage and maintain their yards to prevent pest infestations, including rodents and insects. Proper management and security of composting and waste storage areas are also crucial to deter pests. A pest infestation must be addressed quickly and effectively, adhering to relevant provincial and federal health and safety standards.

### **Education to accompany a bylaw**

There was a consensus that the Town should have educational resources to accompany a bylaw. Educational resources could include a page on the Town's website with resources to help people navigate questions on naturalizing and pictures showcasing examples of preferred naturalized areas.

### **Fire risk mitigation and public safety**

There was a consensus that fire risk mitigation and public safety are essential and make sense in this bylaw.

The group noted that it would be good to understand fire risks better and what should be required or recommended to have a fire-smart property.

The group noted it would be beneficial to better understand what should be enforced for public safety and what should be a recommendation on best practices for fire-smarting.

There was a consensus that vegetation should not interfere with public safety, such as blocking sidewalks and streets.

### **Neighbouring properties**

There was a consensus that vegetation should not encroach onto a neighbouring property. It was suggested that this rule be enforced under a bylaw.

### **Signage**

It was suggested that the Town should provide signage to residents naturalizing their lawns. Posting a sign shows that you have a plan and a mission and helps your neighbours understand your intentions better.

### **Defining debris**

There was not a consensus on the definition of debris. Some suggested that debris should be defined as non-organic garbage, while others indicated that fallen trees and tree limbs should be considered debris. For natural debris, staff suggest something like this: Property owners must remove all dead bushes, fallen tree limbs, dead trees and other natural debris except for materials being kept as part of a property designed with natural landscaping.

### **Handling complaints**

The consensus was that this bylaw should be enforced through complaint rather than being policed or monitored. The group was divided on whether a separate committee should hear complaint appeals or if they should be heard at a regular Council meeting.

There was also some discussion on who should sit on the appeal committee – should industry experts (botanists, firefighters, lawyer) be included?

### **Abandoned vehicles and dumping**

There was a consensus that abandoned vehicles and garbage dumping on lawns should not be allowed and would be appropriate to include in this bylaw. That being said, the Municipal Government Act (MGA) already regulates these specific issues, so perhaps it is unnecessary to include them in TOL's bylaw.

### **Encourage and incentivize**

Beyond a bylaw, how can the Town support, encourage and incentivize property owners to naturalize parts of their properties? Council's original motion that directed the exploration of this bylaw was that staff develop a lawn and park naturalization policy to allow and encourage naturalization initiatives.

### **Naturalizing public spaces**

Participants suggested that the Town should consider naturalizing some public spaces. It has not yet been determined if this belongs in a lawn standards bylaw or should be a separate Town policy or initiative similar to [Halifax's](#).

### **Other comments**

- There was an inquiry on whether naturalized lawns can lead to the depreciation of neighbouring properties.
- Any standards in a bylaw should be clearly defined.
- There was a question on whether the same rules should apply to fenced areas. Do we care about parameters if others can't see it?
- There should be some leniency or support for residents who cannot maintain their lawns due to health or financial constraints.
- One suggestion was that astroturf and fake sod shouldn't be allowed.

### **General input received by email before Community Conversation**

- Better understanding of fire risk.
- A clear understanding of what plants are prohibited as invasive species or noxious weeds.
- How can we realistically control invasive species?
- Support for property owners who can't afford to maintain a property.
- Take heed that we live on the unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq People and reference accordingly.
- How does the Town deal with maintaining vacant or semi-rural properties?

- The Town should work with the property owner to find a solution; fines or the Town doing the cleanup should be a last resort.
- Leaving natural debris in the garden/yard is vital to pollinators.