

Sean Cameron

Law Amendment Committee

Monday, March 4th, 24, Sean Cameron, presenting at 3:15pm

Good afternoon and thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak today about this legislation to support Antigonish Consolidation.

Let me say that I am still holding out a slight glimmer of hope that this bill does not pass into Law.

Minister John Lohr stated that the decision to consolidate rests with the elected councils, and that the elected councils of both have asked for this special legislation. While those very words may be true, nothing is clearer than the fact that only 9 people voted that this was the way to proceed? Sitting as members of the Legislative Assembly, do you feel that 9 residents of 20,000 have the ethical right to dissolve a Town and force it to join with the County without the citizens having a vote?

That is the issue at hand. I will give you a brief history from my seat as an elected councillor for the Town of Antigonish for almost 20 years.

In the 2020 Municipal Elections, NOT ONE candidate ran on the platform of municipal reform. This proposal came up AFTER municipal elections; it was not an election issue. If it had been and the people knew which candidates were pro or con, different councillors may have been in place when the votes were taken.

In 2021 or earlier, the present Mayor, Warden and CAO's were working behind Councils' backs trying to get this amalgamation going. I was surprised by an email alerting me to a special meeting scheduled for Monday, Sept 13th, 2021. It is true that both councils passed the motion to EXPLORE consolidation, which shows that councillors were open to sharing ideas and information on this concept.

What happened next was a well planned out exercise. Our first Joint meeting was held on Monday, September 27th, 2021. Mark Peck from Municipal Affairs lead the show. He painted a very pretty picture of consolidation and how wonderful everything went in Windsor-West Hants. Questions from some councillors asked when the plebiscite was going to be held? Mark Peck answered that there will be no plebiscite. His direct quote was, "We tried that in Pictou County, and we lost!"

When he was asked if anything else negative happened, his reply was "No, not that I can recall." Then I asked him about the RCMP costs of \$1.5 million dollars for the new negotiated contract. "Oh Ya, we missed that one!" was his reply. Jeff Lawrence, former CAO for the Town of Antigonish then said that "...they were aware of that and are working on a solution."

I wonder who the "they" were that he was referring to. In an eleventh hour decision, in an attempt to avoid increased policing costs, the Town would have to dissolve and become part of the Municipality. Municipal Affairs quickly provided \$150,000 to help hire a PR firm, Brighter Communities to sell this idea to the public and councils.

There was very little information, just intangibles presented. No facts. There was no Pros, no Cons, no boundaries identified, no area tax rates were presented, no foresight of what this new Regional Government would look like, what staff would lose their jobs, severances and a whole lot of questions regarding services.

In the end, Brighter Communities presented their findings in their What we Heard Report. Page three of that document, they noted that Public Confidence was lost. "...there was an underlying lack of confidence in the overall process, the municipal leaders and the relationship between the Town and County".

The requested 2nd vote that was held via Zoom was due to the safety of the staff and council members. Ask yourself, if people were really supporting this idea, then why would people be upset? The vote required by Minister John Lohr was almost lost. The threat of a \$25,000 fine and up to a year in jail prevented two councillors from voting the first time, but not the second time. The lone councillor from the County who did declare a conflict the 2nd time was only advised by Municipal Affairs less than 2 hours before the vote. I have spoken directly to this councillor who is on record stating that a plebiscite should have occurred and that if he had voted the will of his residents, this motion would have been defeated.

So do you really feel that the ethical thing was done? Can you sit and reassure yourselves that this is what the residents of Antigonish town and county really want?

This is not a Pro or Anti issue. It is more of a "We want our vote, we want our voices heard".

The Antigonish Town council just appointed Willie Cormier as the Deputy Mayor for 2023/24. One councillor stated that "...he was the only one with the information to serve on the transition team." Why did this candidate have more information than the rest of us? Perhaps he could have shared that information to the rest of Council. I did not have all the information to make an informed decision to amalgamate our Town. How do you think the public is accepting this lack of transparency?

In closing, the Town of Antigonish was incorporated on January 9th, 1889. It was created to provide Water and services to the urban center. This is really the reason behind this rushed amalgamation. We have it and the County needs it to continue the growth around the Town. This is where the bulk of their tax revenue is created. This Council has turned it's back on the citizens. Town citizens have paid for the water and sewer plants for generations. Rather than work collaboratively to resolve these issues, it is easier to dissolve the Town and allow the County to control it for the sake of some developers. Now your government is giving in to the wishes of 9 people, not listening to the voices of 20,000 residents who have a stake in this.

The elections in October and the upcoming Provincial elections should be interesting.

The citizens will have the last say on this.