



The Nova Scotia Municipal Alcohol Project

The Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction produced this profile in collaboration with partners to highlight how provinces and territories assist municipalities to develop or update municipal alcohol policies. Municipal alcohol policies are one element of a comprehensive approach to alcohol policy to encourage a culture of safety and moderation, which is a recommendation of Canada's [National Alcohol Strategy](#).

Nova Scotia Definition of Municipal Alcohol Policy

In Nova Scotia, one role of the Municipal Alcohol Project (sometimes called the Municipal Alcohol Policy Project) is to assist municipalities to develop and implement municipal alcohol policies (MAPs). The project is a partnership between municipalities, district health authorities, the Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness and the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities. A MAP is an official approach by a municipality to shifting the normative culture of heavy alcohol use and to reducing alcohol-related community disruption and other associated harms.

Goal

The vision of the Municipal Alcohol Project is to support strong, vibrant and prosperous communities where moderate and lower-risk alcohol use is the accepted norm. The project aims to realign the relationship of communities with alcohol. This goal is achieved through collaborative partnerships, community engagement and implementing comprehensive, evidence-based MAPs.

Why MAP Is Important

Alcohol has a complex, deeply embedded presence in Nova Scotian families and communities, and the provincial economy. The culture of drinking supports tourism, promotes industry, and keeps small businesses and local economies afloat. Unfortunately, the benefits of the alcohol industry are overshadowed by the substantial costs associated with the practice of excessive drinking. Those costs are significant and broadly impact the wellbeing of our communities. The *Nova Scotia Alcohol Indicators Report 2011* (Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness) details these costs.

A MAP can counter some of the costs and harms associated with the use of alcohol by:

- Increasing public safety;
- Reducing policing and community costs resulting from the overconsumption of alcohol;
- Protecting the municipality from liability issues;

The Nova Scotia Municipal Alcohol Project is a partnership among:

- Municipal leaders
- Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities
- Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness
- Nova Scotia Health Authority (Health Promotion, Mental Health and Addictions, and Public Health) and the IWK Health Centre
- Community partners including police, universities and community health boards



- Reducing the exposure of children and youth exposure to alcohol promotion and consumption; and
- Preventing impaired driving, underage drinking, violence, vandalism, public intoxication, injuries and deaths.

Nova Scotia Public Policy

The province of Nova Scotia experienced significant success with its first comprehensive tobacco strategy, launched in 2001. The development of public policy was key to reducing smoking rates across the province. Collaborative relationships with municipalities played a pivotal role in this work. Local health authorities were supported with health promotion staff dedicated to implementing the tobacco strategy. Grassroots advocacy groups were supported by these professionals to broaden their impact. These lessons have, in part, guided Nova Scotia's work on reducing alcohol-related harms (Nova Scotia Office of Health Promotion, 2005; Smoke Free Kings, 2013).

In 2007, the Nova Scotia Department of Health Promotion and Protection released *Changing the Culture of Alcohol Use in Nova Scotia: An Alcohol Strategy to Prevent and Reduce the Burden of Alcohol-Related Harm in Nova Scotia*. Local mental health and addiction services were supported with health promotion staff to help implement this work. At that time, a small number of municipalities were beginning to connect with health partners about the community impacts of excessive alcohol use. The same year, Halifax experienced a highly publicized alcohol-fueled public disturbance. Due, in part, to the advocacy efforts of two small-town mayors — who discussed publicly and openly their belief that heavy drinking was not just an urban problem — minimum drink price legislation garnered support and was implemented by the province in 2008.

One of these mayors had been at the forefront of implementing public policy with smoke-free public places and smoke-free cars for children. He wanted to know more about how municipalities could use policy to address alcohol-related harms. The Municipal Alcohol Project was initiated through the vision of this mayor and his commitment to the role of municipalities in implementing public policy to protect citizens. His leadership mobilized other municipal leaders to join the project.

The Nova Scotia Approach

Building Policy Readiness and Understanding of Alcohol as a Community Concern

The initial approach of the Nova Scotia Municipal Alcohol Project was to show how excessive drinking disrupted communities. Abundant health data was available about the impact of alcohol, but data on its own does not necessarily influence decision makers. Participants in the project realized that before effective alcohol policy could be implemented, there needed to be a broader community-level understanding of harmful alcohol use as a public health concern. To foster this understanding, an evocative, easily understood local story was used to illustrate the health data (Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities, 2011). This document, on which the towns of Antigonish, Bridgewater and Wolfville collaborated, was the first production of the Nova Scotia Municipal Alcohol Project. Its presentation at the annual conference of the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities in 2011 marked the formal beginning of the project.

Developing Champions

Interested community leaders and representatives of the police and universities were identified as local champions and worked with local health staff to understand how best to move the project forward in local municipalities. As of January 2017, nine communities have published documents



that effectively illustrate their culture of alcohol use.* Numerous municipalities across the province have held alcohol forums. This activity has built a wide network of concerned partners, as well as momentum for the project.

Common Goals

Municipal leaders from across the province held meetings to share successes and to build interest, engagement and commitment. In November of 2012, the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities Board of Directors passed a motion to further their support of the Municipal Alcohol Project. The Department of Health and Wellness formalized and further legitimized the work by including municipal alcohol work as a key action area in the province's mental health and addictions strategy (2012). In 2013, the Department completed its healthy communities protocol, which included alcohol as a priority area (2013). The protocol formalized public health responsibilities in working to reduce alcohol harms. Public Health and Mental Health and Addictions each have local staff dedicated to healthy communities and public policy work.

Building Capacity for Action

After illustrating the problem, the next step was to support municipalities and partners in understanding how to take action. *Municipal Alcohol Policies: Options for Nova Scotia Municipalities* was released in 2013 (Capital District Health Authority, 2013), and outlines a range of evidence-based policy options for consideration by municipalities in Nova Scotia.

Municipal leaders asked that this information be developed into a policy guide that would translate the options into achievable municipal level actions. *Progressive and Prosperous: Municipal Alcohol Policies for a Balanced and Vibrant Future* (Dwyn, G., Johnston, K., & Hopson, J., 2015) was released in the autumn of 2015 and provides comprehensive policy options around five areas: marketing, advertising and sponsorship; enjoyable and safe neighbourhoods; municipally owned or managed properties, facilities and special events; minimizing risk and liability; and workplace alcohol strategy. The Nova Scotia Chiefs of Police Association, the Nova Scotia Association of Police Governance, Injury Free Nova Scotia and the Atlantic Collaborative on Injury Prevention have endorsed these policy recommendations.

Progressive and Prosperous was designed both as a resource and as a community-level intervention. Health staff have been trained on the nuances of the recommendations, on the background consultations and research, and on the opportunities built into the recommendations to further develop municipal and community engagement. Local health staff are supported to work with municipal leaders and staff to do whatever work is needed to tailor the recommendations to the municipality (e.g., drafting policy, coordinating meetings, applying for funding, presenting to council).

Partnerships

The Nova Scotia Municipal Alcohol Project has hinged on effective partnership engagement. However, there are multiple issues facing municipalities, including shrinking budgets, limited tax bases, growing infrastructure deficits and outmigration. Effective partnerships are founded on mutual benefit, respect and commitment. They require flexibility and nimble responsiveness. Understanding the roles and responsibilities of various partners is critical, as is being able to adapt to the ever-changing nature of individual partner systems and challenges. The following organizations are the three main partners of the Municipal Alcohol Project.

* See the entries for Amherst, Cape Breton Regional Municipality, Pictou, Springhill, Truro and Yarmouth in the References.



Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness

From 2010 to 2016–2017, the Department of Health and Wellness provided \$60,000 per year to facilitate community-level alcohol policy work. The Chief Medical Officer of Health provides high-level leadership, guidance and support to all partners. The Department of Health and Wellness has led in developing provincial strategies, protocols, best practices, and health surveillance and data collection. The Department also provided support for knowledge exchange opportunities for partners to further the municipal alcohol work.

Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities

The Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities provides project support, municipal expertise and advice. They provide their policy analyst to support and coordinate the work with municipalities. In 2012, the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities Board of Directors passed a motion to continue their support for the project. They offered concurrent sessions on the project at their 2011, 2013 and 2015 annual conferences and host a page on the project on their website. Municipalities are supported by the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities, but are independent of it. Local municipal leaders are engaged at the local level.

Nova Scotia Health Authority and the IWK Health Centre

The Nova Scotia Health Authority and the IWK Health Centre support frontline health promotion staff and management to dedicate time to support community-level initiatives, coordinate province-wide events, and participate in project planning and evaluation. As of 2016, the Nova Scotia Health Authority manages alcohol project monies to support the Municipal Alcohol Project.

Other critical partners have included local municipal health units, police (municipal and RCMP), universities, community organizations, and injury prevention and community health boards.

Successes

Successes to date are summarized below.

1. Increasing interest:
 - A steadily increasing number of municipalities are involved in municipal alcohol project activities.
 - Nearly one-third of all Nova Scotia municipalities have been engaged.
2. Policy development and implementation:
 - Halifax Regional Municipality has implemented a MAP specific to facilities owned and operated by the municipality, and to advertising and special events. It includes policies on sponsorship and naming rights.
 - Cape Breton Regional Municipality has approved a municipal alcohol issue paper and drafted a comprehensive MAP. The working group was led by health and police partners.
 - The Town of Antigonish is enforcing their noise by-law by charging lease holders when loud alcohol-fueled events are out of control.
3. Increased collaboration and partnership engagement:
 - Numerous local reports tell the story of alcohol use in their municipality.



- Increased communication and collaboration between municipal units and the Nova Scotia Alcohol, Gaming, Tobacco and Fuel Division of Service Nova Scotia (primary Nova Scotia Liquor Control Act regulatory body).
- In one rural community, a local cabaret owner, upon hearing the concerns of the municipality, voluntarily reduced hours of operation from 3:30 a.m. (allowed under a provincial cabaret licence) to 2:00 a.m. (consistent with provincial lounge hours).
- Local development of Municipal Alcohol Project evidence-based policy action teams and working groups.
- Community alcohol projects are developing. Communities are organizing to support and encourage both municipal and provincial policy action.
- Nova Scotia universities are members of the Postsecondary Education Partnership – Alcohol Harms, a national network of colleges and universities co-led by the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction. The partnership is building the capacity of local universities to take effective alcohol policy action. Its work is taking place in parallel to and collaboration with the Municipal Alcohol Project.

Lessons Learned in Nova Scotia

- The work must take a broad, comprehensive approach and be responsive to ever-changing realities. Champions are critical, but they come and go. Government change, at both municipal and provincial levels, can alter the landscape dramatically.
- Engage champions wherever they can be found.
- Meaningful consultations with key stakeholders are critical for project support and eventual policy approval.
- Health data do not readily sway decision makers. Data need to be understandable and relevant to the priorities of the municipality. Messages linked to local issues have a wider reach than general health messages. Language is important: health jargon must be avoided.
- Relationships are critical. Time spent nurturing relationships and planting seeds is necessary and valuable.

Current Challenges

- The Nova Scotia health system, both at the department and health authority levels, has been in transition. In 2016, health authorities were merged into one provincial health authority that works closely with the IWK Health Centre. This merger creates opportunities for a more coordinated and focused approach. Project roles and responsibilities of the Nova Scotia Health Authority, IWK and the Department of Health and Wellness continue to evolve.
- Municipalities in Nova Scotia are financially challenged. A number of small towns have recently dissolved. Municipal elections were held in October 2016. Many new relationships need to be built, which is an opportunity for additional engagement.
- Formal evaluation of the project is needed. A draft logic model has been developed, but resources are needed to formalize this work.



Selected Resources

Nova Scotia Municipal Alcohol Project Portal

A wealth of municipal alcohol-related resources and examples from communities are available in the portal supported by the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities. In particular:

- **In Our Words: What Alcohol Use Looks Like in Our Towns**

A report produced by three Nova Scotia towns using data to illustrate the impact of alcohol in their communities. Six additional reports from other municipalities are also available.

- **Municipal Alcohol Policies: Options for Nova Scotia Municipalities**

A model depicting four policy pillars for the effective reduction of alcohol-related harm: advertisement, availability, enforcement and liability. A preliminary review of policy options available to municipalities in Nova Scotia is provided, based on a scan of available literature and of approaches used by communities around the world.

- **Progressive and Prosperous: Municipal Alcohol Policies for a Balanced and Vibrant Future**

Derived from Municipal Alcohol Policies: Options for Nova Scotia Municipalities, this is a practical guide for developing MAPs.

A Nova Scotia Municipal Alcohol Milestones Report will be available in mid-2017.

Prepared in collaboration with Gwenyth Dwyn, Nova Scotia Health Authority



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