



# What We Heard Report

September 2022



**PLAN  
AMHERST**

This report was prepared by  
UPLAND Planning and Design for  
the Town of Amherst.

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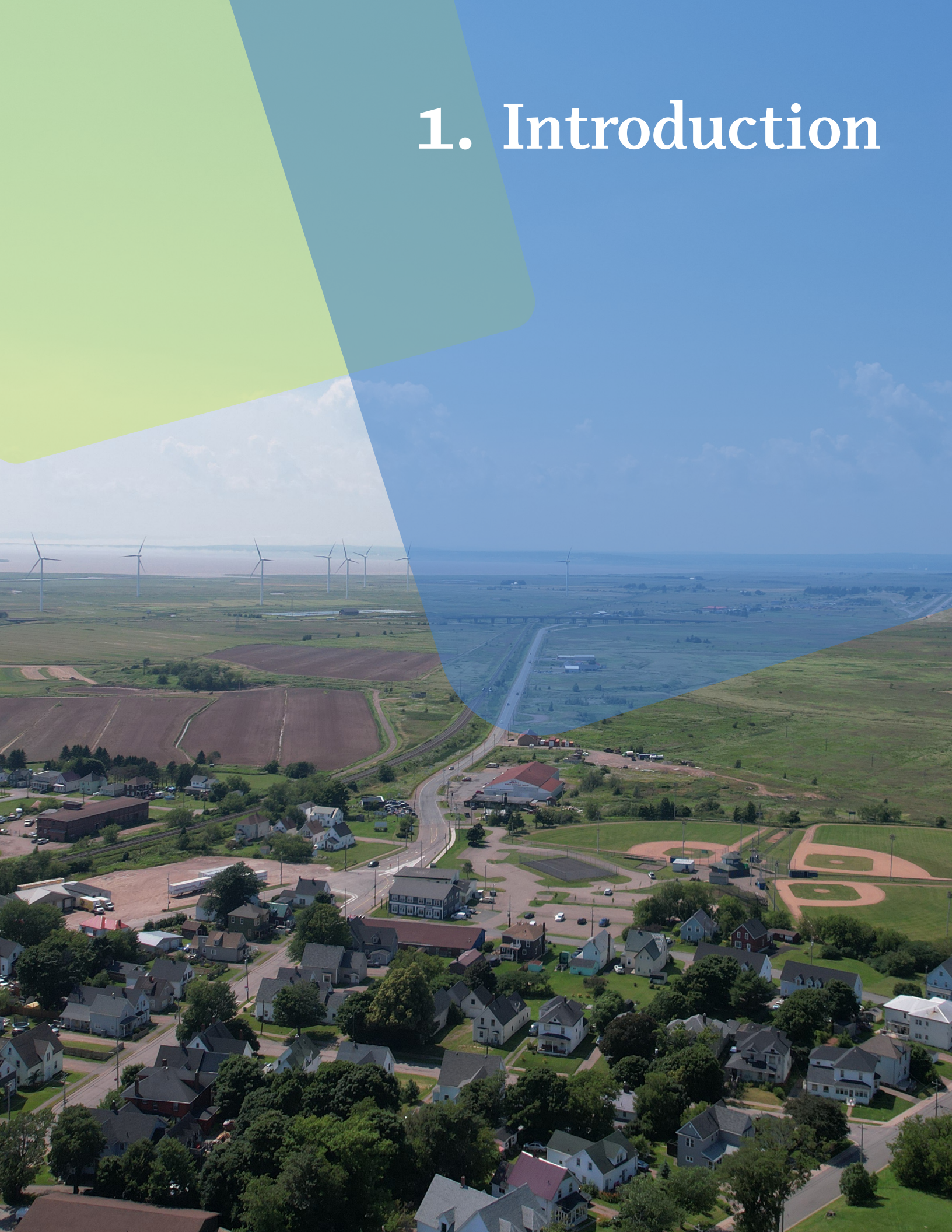


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# 1. Introduction



## 1.1 About the Plan Review

Plan Amherst is a project to review and renew the Municipal Planning Strategy and Land Use Bylaw for the Town of Amherst. These documents were originally adopted in 2005, and although there have been amendments over the years, they have not undergone a full formal review since their inception

Updating the Municipal Planning Strategy and Land Use Bylaw presents an exciting opportunity to renew and reinforce the vision for the Town of Amherst, to make the Municipality's role in land use regulation easier, and to ensure planning policy better serves residents and businesses of the Town. Policy in the new planning documents will consider topics such as:

- Identification of an appropriate set of rules and approaches for the character of neighbourhoods across the town.
- Supporting and encouraging economic development.
- Efficient utilization and growth of town infrastructure.
- Adaptation and mitigation to climate change.
- Supporting a healthy community.

- Promotion of housing variety, including affordable housing options.
- Conservation and protection of valuable environmental and heritage resources.
- Attracting and retaining new residents.
- Land use implications on the transportation network, including active transportation.

The project began in early 2022 with a thorough background study of the existing conditions in the Town. In March, the initial consultation period began, running until early June.

## 1.2 How this Report Will Be Used

This report is a summary of the initial phase of engagement and consists of “What We Heard” from the public throughout the consultation process. Some of this feedback will be used to inform policy decisions in the Plan Review, some will be passed on to the Municipality for consideration through other parts of their operations, and some of it will be filed away without municipal action and simply as an understanding of where the community is coming from. Certain topics addressed by residents throughout the consultation relate to matters outside of the Town’s jurisdiction, such as resource extraction, but are still included in this report to increase Staff and Council’s understanding of the issues that matter to the residents of the Town of Amherst.

The following is a brief and non-exhaustive list of what the *Municipal Government Act* enables Municipalities to control through an MPS and LUB:

- Uses permitted on land
- Lot standards, building size and placement
- Location of services such as sewer and water
- Processes required for certain types of development
- Development in environmentally sensitive areas or where hazards exist

The following are outside of the Municipality’s jurisdiction to regulate:

- Highways
- Resource activities like forestry and mining
- Land ownership and taxation
- People

### 1.3 What We Did

The initial phase of engagement sought to gather input from residents and stakeholders to determine their priorities for the Plan Review. We asked participants to share their perspectives and insights on land use and development in the Town of Amherst and to share their vision for the future of the community. Between March and June, 2022, we hosted a series of in-person and online engagement activities. This engagement was promoted through the following:

- The Town's website and social media
- The project website ([www.planamherst.ca](http://www.planamherst.ca))
- Sharing through social media
- Postcards with the project website details and a "call to action" question
- Email listserv

Engagement activities for the initial phase of consultation for Plan Amherst included:

- A public survey (available online and hard copy upon request) with 336 respondents
- An online mapping exercise with 284 unique visitors, over 700 page visits and 37 comments

- A Community Vision Workbook with 4 submissions
- Two in-person public workshops and one online public workshop

We also contacted over 50 stakeholders and conducted interviews with 25 different groups and individuals including:

- Four Local Business Owners
- Members of Council
- Town Staff
- Amherst Chamber of Commerce
- Amherst Food Assistance Network
- Amherst Striders
- Amherst Area Heritage Trust
- Bridge Adult Services Society
- CANSA
- CBDC - Cumberland
- Cumberland Homelessness and Housing Support Association
- Cumberland Museum Society
- Cumberland Partners
- Cumberland Regional Library
- Lion's Club
- Maggie's Place
- Nova Scotia Health
- SOAR Community Health Board
- YMCA of Cumberland
- YREACH

The results from these engagement activities demonstrate a series of key themes and findings, which this report explores.



## 1.4 Context & Gaps

This engagement took place during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. In-person engagement opportunities were limited and turnouts were low for public workshops. Online engagements, however, saw high levels of participation with 1 out of every 28 residents submitting a response to the public survey.

### Public Survey Demographics

With any survey for the general population, the goal is for the results to accurately represent the population. Samples should represent the demographic characteristics of a population with regards to age distribution, gender identity, and income. If a sample is not a true representation of the population, actions can be taken to engage with underrepresented cohorts, and/or results can be weighted to more accurately depict the 'true' population in a community.

The project team used Statistics Canada 2021 and 2016 Census data (the most up to date data currently available) as a comparative measure to the Public Survey results to

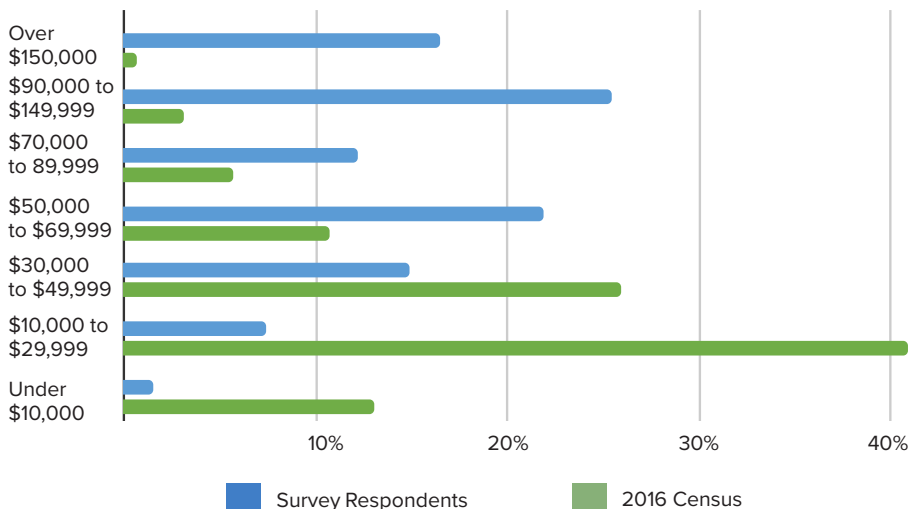
understand how the survey sample compares to the community's profile. We found the following when comparing survey respondent demographic data with the census:

### Income

Respondents whose household income is below \$50,000 are largely underrepresented in this survey. This is especially true for households that earn between \$10,000 and \$29,000 annually. While the 2016 Census shows that over 40% of households in Amherst are in this income bracket, less than 10% of survey respondents indicated this.

On the contrary, households whose income was above \$50,000 represented the majority of survey respondents. Of particular interest are households whose incomes are above \$90,000. While the 2016 shows that, together, they represented less than 10% of the population, they were more than 50% of survey respondents.

Figure 1: Comparison of household incomes



### Age Distribution

The majority of survey respondents indicated being between the ages of 35 and 54. 16% of respondents identified as being 50-54 years of age cohorts. However, this age cohort only comprises 6.5% of the population, according to the 2021 Census. Similarly, close to 14% of respondents belong to the 35-39 age cohort and 15% belong to the 40-44 cohort, but only 5% of the population in Amherst belongs to each of these age groups.

There were no responses from the two youngest cohorts (under 19 years of age) and from the two oldest cohorts (over 80 years of age).

### Racialised Communities

When looking at individuals who identified as being from a racialised community, Indigenous respondents were exactly representative of the Census figure at 3.9%. Individuals who identify as Black represent 2.4% of the population according to the 2016 Census, but were only 1.2% of the survey respondents. Other racially visible groups represented 2.7% of survey respondents, while they were 1.80% of the total population.

### Residents with a Disability

According to the 2017 Survey on Disability, over 22% of residents in the Town of Amherst identified with having a disability. However, they only represented 6% of survey respondents.

**Figure 3: Representation of racialised communities**

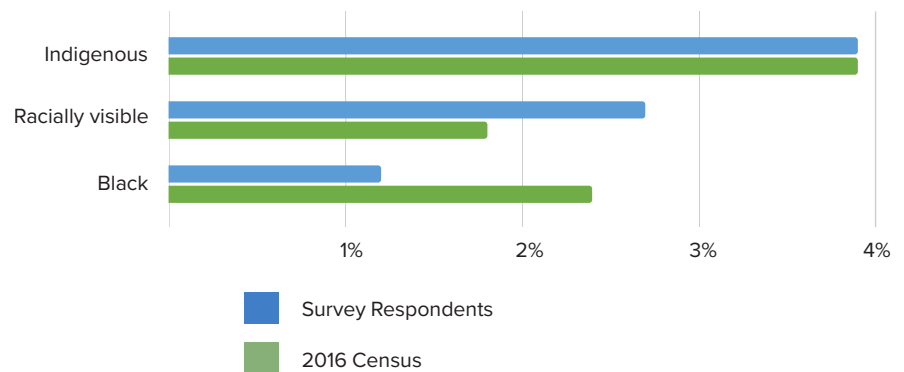
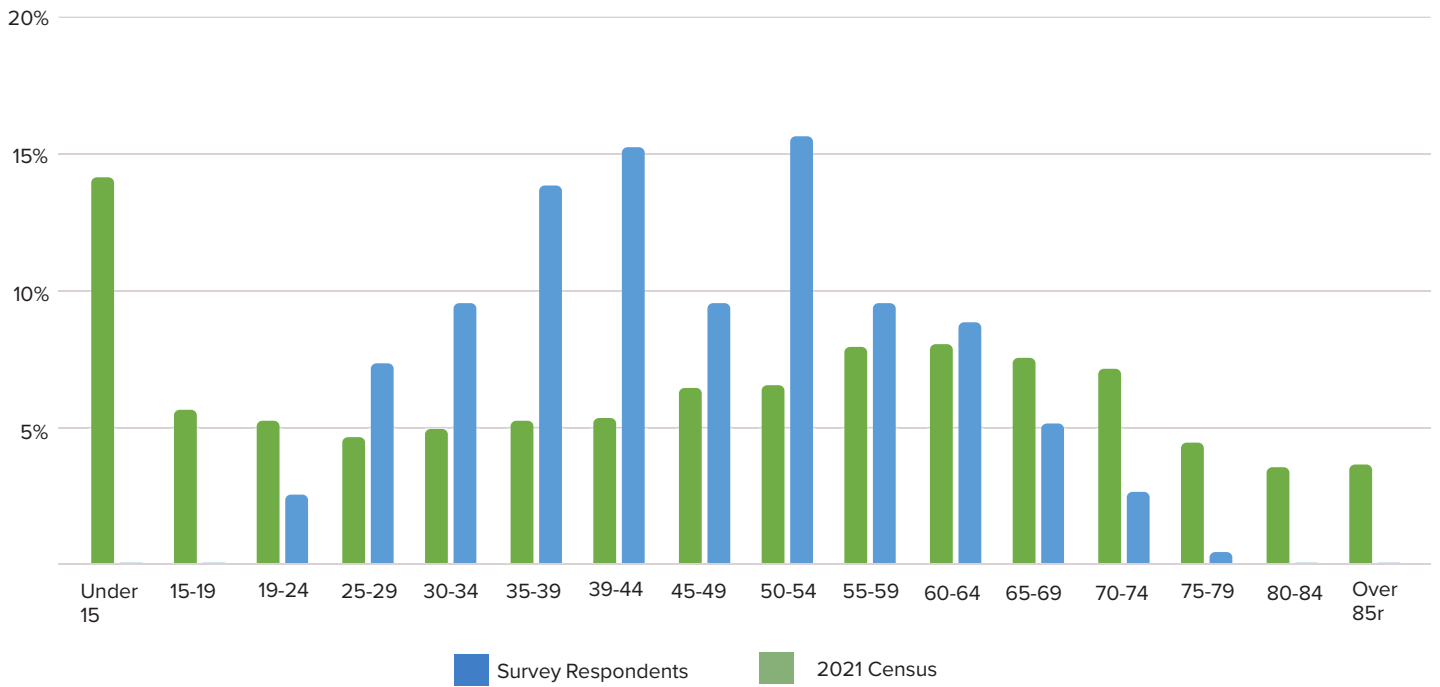


Figure 2: Comparison of age distribution of survey respondents against 2021 Census.

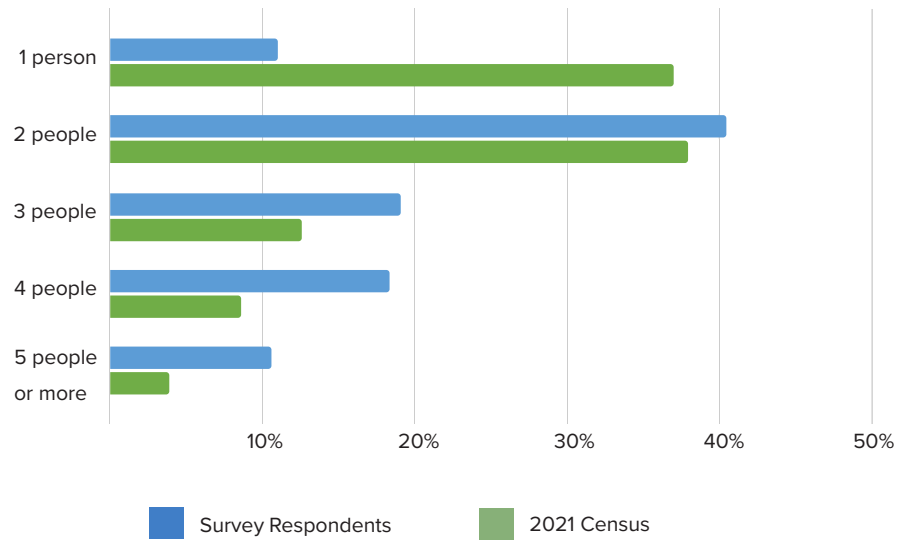


## Household Size

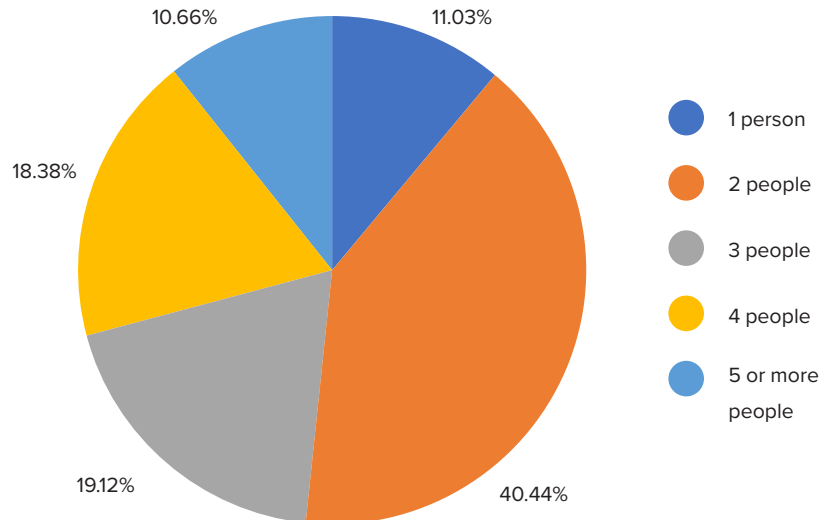
The average household size of survey respondents is 2.8, whereas this figure is 2.1 in the 2021 Census. This means that smaller households were underrepresented in the survey.

When comparing the various household sizes between survey respondents and statistics from the 2021 Census, it can be noted that households with 1 person are underrepresented in the survey. Although 1-person households comprise 37% of the households in the Town of Amherst, they were only 11% of survey respondents.

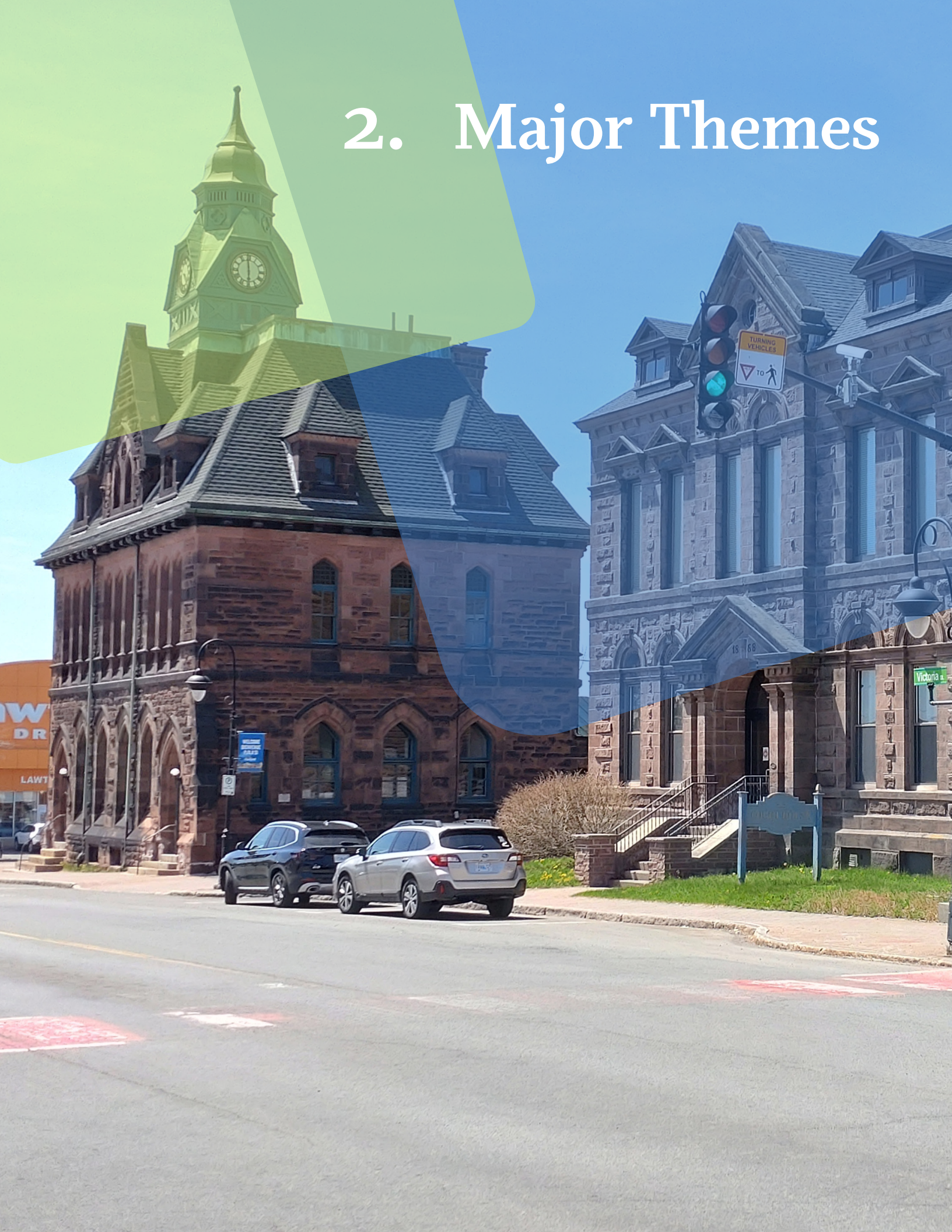
**Figure 4: Comparison of household size of survey respondents against 2021 Census**



**Figure 5: Household size of survey respondents**



## 2. Major Themes





## 2.1 Housing

Housing issues are varied and complex. In recent years it has become a very hot topic, with real estate prices soaring and the prospect of home ownership becoming further out of reach for Nova Scotians. Renting has also become more expensive than ever and people are struggling to find housing and to make ends meet. Amherst is not immune to this trend, and housing was the most commonly discussed topic throughout the initial consultation period. Housing availability was also the most important issue for survey respondents when asked what they felt the Municipal Planning Strategy needed to address.

The situation in the Town is complex and affecting people in a variety of ways. More than three quarters of survey respondents stated that it was very difficult (46%) or somewhat difficult (31%) to find housing in Amherst. Nearly half of survey respondents cited housing as one of the biggest challenges of living in the Town, and many who are thinking about leaving the community say that the cost of housing is a driving factor.

Conversely, the cost of housing is also bringing new residents

to Amherst, as it has not reached the same levels as in more urban centres, such as Moncton and Halifax, making it a more affordable place to live in comparison. Just over one fifth of survey respondents cited the cost of housing as something that makes Amherst a great place to live. The overall affordability of housing in Amherst (in comparison to other parts of the country) has been a major driver for new residents moving to the area. This leaves some longtime residents concerned about rising property values and rising tax rates, as we heard from 15% of survey respondents that paying property tax is a considerable challenge for homeowners on fixed and low incomes.

For renters, the biggest challenges were the availability of rental units and the cost of renting in the Town. We also heard that housing suitability was a big challenge - either rental options were not in good condition and required major maintenance or repair, or they weren't suitable for meeting the needs of the household (namely, there weren't enough larger, multi-bedroom rental options). For homeowners, the biggest challenges included difficulty

accessing amenities and services without a vehicle, difficulty paying for services and utilities, and making necessary repairs to their properties. In contrast to renters wanting larger housing options, homeowners wanted to see smaller housing options, especially for seniors who want to downsize from their larger homes.

When asked about their support for a variety of approaches to increasing housing diversity and affordability, energy efficiency upgrades and housing for 1-person households came out on top. Physically accessible housing received strong support as well, as did smaller housing options like granny suites, mobile homes and tiny homes. Increased density in some neighbourhoods was supported by just over half of survey respondents and represented the approach with the greatest opposition. Some residents are concerned about the development of multi-unit buildings in areas that are predominantly single-family homes and worry that these developments are not compatible with neighbourhood character. There was also some support for adaptive reuse of existing buildings, with one idea being

the development of small condos in the underutilized buildings downtown.

Despite its relative affordability, Amherst is still seeing rising rates of homelessness in the community - both in the form of people living rough and in the form of hidden homelessness, where residents are couch surfing to access safe shelter. A service-based count of individuals experiencing homelessness was conducted by local service providers in March 2021 and counted 48 people experiencing homelessness in Amherst, though this is believed to be an underestimation due to service disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (both from a service delivery perspective as well as an access perspective). We heard from many residents and stakeholders that they would like to see more done to address this issue, such as investment in an emergency shelter in the Town and transitional housing to support people experiencing housing precarity. Transitional housing specifically for youth was also identified as a need in the Town. For those trying to access affordable housing programs through Cobequid Housing, the situation is not promising with a

waitlist of 3 years, leaving many people in an unstable housing position.

Many spoke of the complexity of the housing situation and the need for housing options that support residents facing substance use and mental health disorders. Many residents who are facing these additional challenges are experiencing major obstacles to obtaining housing, as local landlords and hotels will no longer rent to them, making their options extremely limited.



## 2.2 Social Issues

### Social Cohesion

Nearly 20% of survey respondents have moved to Amherst in the last 5 years, and approximately 5% in the last year. We heard from many respondents that they were having trouble integrating into the community and some cited feelings of isolation since their move. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these feelings, with significant scaling back of public events and social gatherings, leaving many in the community feeling a lack of social cohesion.

We also heard about a lack of social cohesion from longtime residents. Although the top three things that survey respondents cited as what makes Amherst a great place to live were the small town atmosphere (65%), family and friends (57%) and the sense of community (44%), we also hear that there is a significant divide between socioeconomic groups. We heard many references to the disparities that exist between the two “sides of the tracks” and a desire to see a more inclusive community where people of various backgrounds, ethnicities and socioeconomic statuses are living together in a more integrated way.

### Inclusivity

We heard that residents feel there is a disparity between how public funds are allocated in the Town, with a disproportionate amount of resources going towards beautification and maintenance of wealthier neighbourhoods, and significantly less being allocated to low-income neighbourhoods. There is a desire to see the Town take a more inclusive approach to resource allocation and to provide a set standard of service to all neighbourhoods. Some examples included the addition of sidewalks, trails and streetlights in low-income neighbourhoods.

Amherst has also seen a large number of new Canadians settle in the Town in recent years, and although most don't feel there is an outward hostility toward them, they do feel a sense of indifference and many are facing social isolation. Some suggestions we heard were to host more inclusive and welcoming events for all residents, such as a multicultural festival, and to approach the Town's recreation programming through an inclusivity lens that actively welcomes new immigrants to participate.



## **Addictions & Mental Health**

We heard a staggering amount about the challenges that many Amherst residents are facing with substance use disorders. There are many concerns about the lack of services and supports available to residents facing these deeply challenging situations. Some residents advocate for a safe injection site in Amherst to help destigmatize those struggling with substance use disorders and lessen the amount of health and safety issues that come with substance use in public areas, such as used needles, which some residents have found in public parks and near play areas. In addition to a safe injection site, some residents would also like to see greater public awareness and education around substance use disorders in the Town, as it is clearly an issue impacting the wider community. Some suggestions included offering greater training in harm reduction and mental health support for front line workers, as well as for community members. A dedicated clinic focused on mental health services was also seen as something the Town could greatly benefit from.



## 2.3 Economic Development

Economic development plays an important role in the character of a community. Across engagement methods, participants envisioned a vibrant economy in the Town of Amherst. Due to its central location, many saw the Town as the hub of the Maritimes, but that this identity was not being capitalized on. Instead, it was repeated several times that Amherst was seen as a place to pass by on the way to other communities, rather than a destination that people drove to. The latter is what the community would like to see itself as.

An aspect of what can make a vibrant economy is in the variety of its businesses. However, many pointed to the lack of shopping and dining options in the Town, which resulted in them traveling to other communities to access them instead of investing in their own. This was also pointed out as a deterrent for younger people to move and stay.

In both the consultation and in the survey, participants saw the opportunity for the Town to play a bigger role in attracting businesses. While the role of big businesses and industries is important, there was an emphasis on the Town supporting small

businesses. Many pointed to the struggle of small independent businesses in staying open, but they also highlighted their role in making the Town a unique place.

### Employment

A key piece to economic development is employment. 78% of survey respondents consider it important for the Municipal Planning Strategy to address the availability of employment in the Town.

Many survey respondents wanted to see better employment opportunities with better pay to encourage people to stay in the community, especially for young professionals and health care staff. In the long term, they also wished to see economic opportunities developed not just for the current residents, but also for future generations to encourage them to stay. Currently, many indicated that there were too few opportunities for youth after they completed high school.

There is also a general concern about the effects on the housing crisis on employment. The lack of housing is seen as a deterrent for people and for new businesses to come to the Town.

### **Downtown Revitalization**

Across all engagement methods, there is a strong desire to see a thriving, charming and inviting downtown core. Many participants indicated that this had been the case in the past, but they saw it change over time. Better maintenance of this area, especially street clean-ups, could help make it a more welcoming place.

Revitalizing the downtown core includes having businesses and activities that can serve both residents and tourists alike. During the in-person consultation, participants indicated that, while there are office spaces, there is a lack of retail establishments for people who work there. An issue in particular for those who live downtown is the lack of a grocery store, which also serves as a deterrent for people to live there.



## 2.4 Transportation

Transportation plays a key role in people's ability to access events and opportunities. However, these options are limited in Amherst. With a lack of a public transit system in place, taxis are the only option for those who are not able to travel by private vehicle or for whom active transportation is a challenge. Seniors, new immigrants and low-income individuals were mentioned as groups that were particularly affected by this. Across methods, the desire to have an affordable, public transportation system was brought forward several times. This issue also affects the student population.

### Active Transportation

45% of survey respondents indicated not being able to access the amenities they needed for daily life by walking or other methods of active transportation. The most common barrier to active transportation was that places were too far.

Another common barrier was the lack of proper infrastructure that could enable active transportation modes. A survey respondent added that safe active transportation

infrastructure was needed, especially as they got older. Across methods, participants wanted to see the following:

- + Development of cycling trails
- + Bike lanes in Town
- + Improved and safe sidewalks
- + More walking spaces
- + Services and amenities within walking distance
- + Creating diverse housing options closer to services and amenities to decrease reliance on personal automobiles

### Transportation Infrastructure

65% of survey respondents selected the quality of roads as one of the challenges of living in Amherst. Across methods, participants wished to see better conditions for both roads and sidewalks in the Town. In particular, they pointed to the potholes on the road, and to the uneven sidewalks, which made them feel unsafe. Additionally, there is a need for better connectivity to services and amenities, like having sidewalks in commonly-transited areas.



## 2.5 Service and Amenities

67% of survey respondents indicated that the small-town atmosphere was a key factor that made Amherst a great place to live. However, across methods, participants pointed at the lack of services and amenities available. Without more opportunities and activities for younger people to participate in, a variety of stores and restaurants, and better access to health care, participants felt that people would be inclined to leave. Although there are some opportunities for young people to participate in, the timing is not ideal, as there is a lack of programs in the evenings and weekends. There is also a gap in recreational and sports facilities, especially for adults.

Although many participants see the opportunity for Amherst to become a destination, the Town has a gap in services and amenities for visitors, especially around accommodations. Having lost two bed and breakfasts and with only one hotel in the Town, participants mentioned that this hindered their ability to host more events and welcome visitors. Additionally, to make the Town more hospitable, survey respondents also indicated that there was a need for more street clean-ups.

### **Access to Healthcare**

The access and availability of health care was a theme of concern across all engagement methods. Many survey respondents noted difficulties with accessing doctors and specialists in Town, especially with no walk-in clinics around. With an ageing population, the need to have palliative care was also brought up. One respondent mentioned the difficulties in accessing health care is a key reason for their consideration to move away from Amherst.

While the hospital is fairly new, participants mentioned that it was struggling to find staff, and that this was contributing to difficulties with accessing health services. Although the struggle to find housing in the Town has contributed to this, some also called for a better pay to health care staff.



## 2.6 Recreation

Recreation came up across all methods and focused on two main issues: space and programming. Although many spoke highly of the Amherst YMCA and the Stadium, it was clear across methods that recreation facilities are not meeting the needs of the Town. Residents are enthusiastic about the possibility of a new recreation space in the community. They want a space that could host a multitude of sports and recreational activities, as well as indoor special events. Most of the residents and stakeholders we spoke with want to see this facility in the centre of Town to make it as accessible as possible for the community.

There is also a strong desire to see a space that is welcoming for teens and youth, as this demographic is currently lacking access to safe leisure space in the community. Many residents are concerned that a lack of space geared towards teens and youth puts them at increased risk and exposure to harmful substances and behavior.

For younger children, we heard great things about the Kids MultiSport program and some residents would like to see similar

programs offered for other age groups, including adults. We also heard about successful past programming that had recreation staff running activities in local parks during the summer months. Many residents would like to see those programs come back, as they note a lack of options, especially for kids ages 8-12. The equipment loan program was another one that got high praise from residents.

We heard a lot about how recreation opportunities are an excellent way for newcomers to meet other residents and build social connections, and with the high rates of immigration to Amherst, there is a considerable need for these options. We also heard there can be cost barriers to accessing some of the most popular options in Amherst, like hockey, in addition to cultural barriers for newcomers who have never played the sport. Many people also spoke about the low or no cost options in the community, such as the Amherst Striders whose events reach over 700 Amherst residents and the desire to see the Town invest in walking and cycling infrastructure to promote more low-barrier recreation options for residents.



## 2.7 Parks, Trails & Open Space

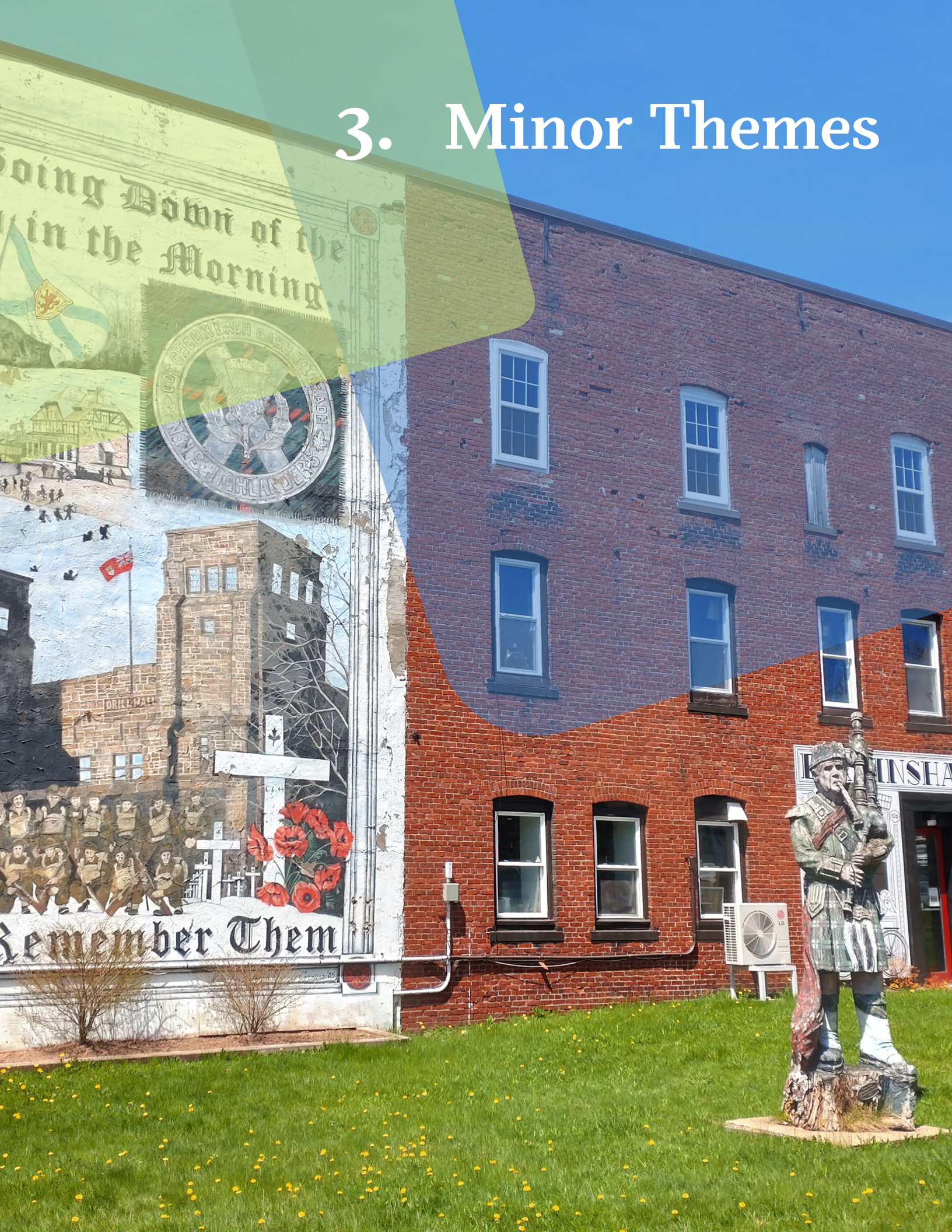
Amherst has a considerable amount of parks, trails and open space for a Town of its size. Access to parks and open space was considered by 31% of survey respondents as one of the top elements that makes Amherst a great place to live, with another 23% citing the trail system. Investment in the trail system was big in the 1980s, but the momentum for trail development and maintenance never fully caught on. The trail system was a topic that consistently came up across all engagement methods and is an area where many residents would like to see more investment from the Town. The most common issue raised was the condition of trails in the community and the overall maintenance of the system, as well as the expansion of the network. Residents want to see trails maintained on a regular basis and a faster response from the Town when issues arise. We also heard about a desire to see better connectivity, signage and promotion of the trails in Amherst.

From a connectivity standpoint, some suggestions for future trail developments included:

- + The old rail bed connecting West Highlands Elementary, Triders Craft Beer, and Emmerson Packaging
- + Adding a spur trail to connect to the Community College and Shopping Area
- + Trails along the marsh where people can connect with nature

When it came to signage and promotion, residents suggested a map of the trails and park system that would be beneficial to both locals, new residents and visitors to the community, as well as clear standardized signage to mark the trails. We also heard suggestions around educational signage along the trails that could tell the history of the community, or speak to the natural environment.

# 3. Minor Themes







### **3.1 Heritage and Built Form**

The Town of Amherst is rich in its history and heritage. While there is a general appreciation of the Town's history and a strong desire to preserve its historical buildings, there was a general consensus that their maintenance was not being addressed. Many survey respondents mentioned that buildings looked run down, which made the Town seem inhospitable to visitors. However, they also saw an opportunity for the Town to take a bigger role in preserving the Town's historic character while embracing change and development.

In addition to the preservation of the buildings, there was a suggestion to capitalize on the Town's heritage for potential summer festivities.



### **3.2 Accessibility and Inclusion**

While part of improving accessibility is in the betterment of the Town's infrastructure, there are other aspects that the Town could work towards to make Amherst a more inclusive community. Suggestions included:

- + Improving healthcare access for individuals with disabilities
- + More opportunities for children with diverse needs
- + Improving accessibility downtown
- + Opportunities and activities for all ages
- + Facilitating activities regardless of income level



### **3.3 Arts & Culture**

The Arts and Culture community in Amherst is strong, and there is a desire to capitalize on this sector to help make the Town more vibrant and welcoming to residents and visitors alike. However, the current gap in this sector has resulted in people having to travel outside of the Town to participate in programs and activities.

Across all engagement methods, participants highlighted the lack of spaces available for the arts. With the only School as the only theatre space available to book and with some challenges that come along with it, some see the need for an arts and culture centre.

The limited number of activities that take place was also brought up as an issue. Many survey respondents wanted to see more festivals, especially ones that could cater to younger people and that could bring the community together. As a way to encourage more public events, some participants wanted to see less procedural barriers to be able to host them.



### 3.4 Governance

Governance is always a topic that receives a wide range of opinions during public engagements and the response in Amherst was no different. Many in Amherst feel that the Town and the wider Cumberland County get forgotten by higher levels of government and don't receive the attention and investment they deserve. On a local level, we heard from some survey respondents that they want to see greater measures of accountability for staff and council - tangible ways to measure progress and ensure checks and balances are in place to prevent government overreach.

We also heard about the desire to see the Town boundaries expand to allow for new housing and commercial development.

We heard from some that progress in the Town of Amherst has felt slow, but we also heard about some tangible steps that Town and Council are making to address some of the most pressing issues in the community, such as the Cornerstone project to help address the homelessness crisis.

We heard from stakeholders and survey respondents that they feel more positive about the direction of Town than they have in years and are hopeful that some of the big issues can be addressed through projects like the Plan Review and the community centre.



### **3.5 Environment**

The predominant topic we heard relating to the environment was around climate change, flooding and protecting the Tantramar marshlands. We heard concerns from residents about the impact sea level rise will have on the Chignecto Isthmus and the important connection between New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Some feel this needs to be addressed sooner rather than later, as it will have significant impacts on the area.



### **3.6 Attracting New Residents**

With a high rate of newcomers coming to Amherst from within Canada and internationally, there is a desire to see a Town-led initiative for newcomers to welcome them to the community and help to orient them as they settle into the community. We heard a lot about events hosted by the Town before the COVID-19 pandemic and a desire to see those return in the future to bring residents together and encourage social cohesion. We also heard suggestions around other events that could help to

make new residents feel more welcome, such as a multicultural festival where newcomers can share their culture with their new community.

In addition to newcomers, there is a desire to make Amherst attractive to those who call the Town home but have moved to explore other opportunities. Multiple survey respondents said their ideal future involved bringing the younger generation back to the community to build their families and set up their lives.

