

What We Heard Report

CBRM Housing Strategy - Phase 1
September 2024



CAPE BRETON
REGIONAL MUNICIPALITY



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*We respectfully acknowledge that we live and work in Unama'ki,
a part of Mi'kma'ki, the unceded and traditional territory of the
Mi'kmaq people who have upheld their commitments to the Treaties
of Peace and Friendship since 1725.*

*We also acknowledge that people of African descent have been in
Nova Scotia for over 400 years, and we honour and offer gratitude to
those ancestors of African descent who came before us to this land.*

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Thank you to everyone who has taken the time to speak with us or fill in the community survey about housing across CBRM. Your ideas, insights and experiences have been invaluable in helping us understand CBRM’s housing past and present, and envision a better future. We would like to thank and acknowledge those who have been working for years to improve housing across CBRM. This project is built on the work of these individuals and organizations. We are honoured to be a part of CBRM’s housing story.

What is this project about?

The Cape Breton Regional Municipality is undertaking a Housing Strategy to identify existing housing challenges, opportunities and solutions.

This work will include:

- Public and stakeholder engagement to inform the Housing Strategy;
- Recommendations for a potential new comprehensive residential development incentive program;
- Identification of municipally-owned surplus lands suitable for residential development;
- Residential development incentive program analysis including a land development framework, policy and regulatory review, and financial feasibility assessment; and
- Implementation of a road map and monitoring and evaluation framework.

This Housing Strategy will provide a framework for CBRM to support housing across the municipality. It will serve as a comprehensive and measurable plan to increase the amount of housing in CBRM’s communities while promoting sustainable growth and development.

This report represents our engagement findings from phase 1. The goal of this phase has been to understand CBRM’s housing story and housing needs across CBRM. Through targeted research and community engagement, this phase of the work sets the stage for the rest of the Housing Strategy project.

What housing initiatives has CBRM been working on?

In recent years, Cape Breton Regional Municipality has actioned a number of initiatives aimed at improving the housing situation. As a municipal government, CBRM does not build housing, but they do enforce the building code and land use bylaws which shape the look and feel of communities.

In 2023, CBRM applied for and received Housing Accelerator Funding from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation for eight initiatives aimed at building more homes faster. Many of these actions are already underway, including the establishment of an Affordable Housing Grant Policy in April 2024. This policy provides up to \$200,000 (\$20,000 per unit) for the development of affordable housing units where the rent does not exceed 30% of a tenant's gross annual household income.

In May 2024, Council also passed the Shared Dwelling License Bylaw which requires shared dwelling owners/operators to obtain a license to legally operate in CBRM and comply with all applicable CBRM bylaws along with Nova Scotia Building Code Regulations, National Building Code, and Fire Safety Regulations.

In spring 2024, CBRM launched two new initiatives aimed directly at housing. The first is aimed at developing pre-approved building designs which fit into CBRM's existing neighbourhoods and can be quickly built. The second is the development of a Housing Strategy to coordinate CBRM's housing efforts and chart a path for a better housing future. This report marks the start of this journey and the following pages record what we've learned so far through community engagement between June and July 2024.

CBRM Housing Accelerator Fund Initiatives

1. Community Climate Adaptation & Land Banking
 - Develop approach for land banking for affordable housing development and climate sensitive design
2. Transit Oriented Development & Promotion of High-Density Development
 - Regulatory changes to promote intensification and mixed-use housing in urban serviced areas
3. Parking Requirement Modernization
 - Creation of parking strategy and elimination of parking minimums
4. Affordable Housing Construction Program
 - Provide incentives for affordable housing projects
5. Infill & Gentle Density Initiative
 - Create pre-approved housing plans for small scale residential infill up to 6 units
6. Housing Incentives Initiative
 - Analyze and implement tax incentive program for residential development
7. E-Permitting System
 - Design and implement new online permitting system

Open House Findings

On June 18 & 19, 2024, four public open houses were held with two being in Sydney, one in North Sydney, & one in Glace Bay. The purpose of the open houses was to share information about CBRM's Housing Strategy and learn more about the community's experience with housing and vision for the future. Each open house began with a presentation and was followed by discussions using engaging questions to gather feedback from participants.

What we asked

The following questions were displayed on boards for feedback from participants. People wrote responses on sticky notes and added them to the boards. In some cases, we had conversations that touched on these questions or individual experiences with housing.

- What's your vision for housing?
- What's happening now?
- How would you describe CBRM's housing situation?
- What do you consider to be housing-related issues in CBRM?
- What opportunities do you see to increase housing across CBRM?

What we learned

The current housing situation was summarized by the words "dire" and "desperate" due to the low vacancy rates, increasing and hidden homelessness, lack of shelter options, lack of affordable housing, lack of rental units, and stories of people living in unsafe conditions.

Additionally, it was identified that there is not enough housing, particularly for students, seniors, and people who need accessible units. People expressed that they don't have choice when it comes to housing and that people are living with their extended families as a result. Another barrier to housing can be one's family name or reputation.

The three most identified housing related issues were:

- **Physical condition of existing housing** – Not all housing has been maintained and some housing has health and safety issues. The cost to renovate is too high for people to make upgrades.
- **Affordability** – There is a lack of affordable housing units and the people cannot afford what units are available on top of their other expenses.
- **Excessive distance to amenities** – People are limited to finding housing where transit is provided so they can access amenities such as grocery stores to meet their daily needs.

To improve housing, participants suggested CBRM explore different built forms of housing such as co-ops, condominiums, tiny homes, and houseboats. Other opportunities identified by participants include tax exemptions for affordable or supportive housing, incentives to renovate existing housing to include heat pumps, using surplus lands for housing, and future student housing. Further work is required to determine what actions are within CBRM's jurisdiction.

Focus Groups Findings

On July 15 & 16, 2024, two virtual focus groups were held, one with housing service providers & one with community organizations. The purpose of these meetings was to have in-depth discussions with people in roles related to housing to get a deeper understanding about the community's experience with housing. Each focus group was guided by open-ended discussion questions.

What we asked

The following questions were asked to each focus group to prompt discussions:

- How would you describe the current housing situation in CBRM?
- What challenges are people facing related to housing? What needs are going unmet?
- What role can CBRM play in meeting those needs?
- What opportunities are there to improve housing?
- What residential development incentives do you think would have the biggest impact in CBRM?

What we learned

At the focus groups, participants spoke about social, institutional, financial, and built environment barriers that exist. They also acknowledged that housing needs are interconnected with other needs and living expenses that affect people's ability to obtain housing. The challenges are summarized below:

- **Perception** - Negative sentiments and perception towards students and people experiencing homelessness and that they are causing the housing crisis.
- **Tenant Support** – Tenants are not connected to the supports that are available to them and do not know where to find this information.

- **Infrastructure** – Existing infrastructure cannot support higher density development and limits what housing can be built.
- **Housing Options** – There are limited options for downsizing and moving to a smaller house.
- **Maintenance & Repairs** – Housing falls into disrepair because people cannot afford repairs or upgrades.
- **Labourer Housing** – To build new homes there needs to be accommodations for labourers during construction.
- **Development Costs** – High development costs require high sales prices or rents.

Participants identified the follow opportunities to improve housing in CBRM:

- Exploring different built forms of housing such as pre-fabricated housing, mini/modular homes, and conversion of existing unused schools.
- Providing development incentives for increasing housing diversity.
- Increasing density within the downtown area.
- Real Estate firms creating rental branches to help people find appropriate rentals.
- Prioritizing awarding surplus lands to non-profits to create affordable housing.
- Rapid Housing Initiative can help non-profits create more affordable housing.
- Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs) may be able to be developed to support condominium development.

As CBRM's role in housing is to create regulations and to facilitate the development process, participants suggested CBRM restrict Airbnbs to be owner-occupied, explore inclusionary zoning, create a winter housing strategy, collaborate with the non-profit sector, and reduce barriers (red tape) for developers. CBRM can support people experiencing homelessness by not removing tents encampments.

Community Survey Findings

The project team launched a community survey in June 2024 to explore local and municipal housing needs. The online survey was open from June 13th to July 12th 2024 and received 940 responses from across the municipality.

What we asked

The survey contained 17 questions grouped under three headings:

- Demographics
- Tell us about your experiences with housing: including but not limited to, what's your housing situation, what are your housing needs, what challenges prevent you from meeting your needs, what's your (gross) household income and how much of your household income do you spend on housing?
- Tell us about housing in CBRM: how would you describe the current housing situation, what opportunities do you see for improving housing, what do you consider to be housing issues in CBRM, and what is your long-term vision for housing in your community?

What we learned

Throughout the survey, respondents consistently reported housing affordability and availability as key housing concerns alongside lack of repair and maintenance. Many reported the current housing situation as a desperate crisis as housing becomes increasingly unaffordable for the average person.

Approximately 48% of respondents reported their housing needs were not being met by their current housing, with renters representing the majority. Approximately 56% of respondents reported spending more than 30% of their income on housing.

Across the open-ended survey questions, respondents expressed a desire for the following housing types (in approximate order of most to least commonly reported):

- Multi-unit buildings
- Apartments
- Student targeted housing
- Senior targeted housing
- Family housing and rentals (2-3 bedrooms)
- Co-operative housing
- Accessible housing
- Tiny homes
- Pet friendly housing
- Non-market housing options
- Starter homes
- Accessory Dwelling Units (ADU's)

The desire for a greater variety of housing types, more rental and ownership options, and lower cost of living were consistent themes across respondents. Of the opportunities identified to improve the housing situation, the majority fell into the themes of: systematic financial changes; incentives for new development; better utilize existing resources; and improve the rental situation.

As the project team continues to prepare the Housing Strategy, we are keenly aware that survey respondents want to see a housing strategy that addresses housing affordability both immediately and over the long term. It is necessary to establish clear housing targets that are within municipal jurisdiction and progress towards those goals must be communicated publicly in an accessible and transparent manner.

Housing Data

As of 2023, CBRM has a population of 101,908 people (45,592 households). The average household income is \$75,572 and the average dwelling value is \$197,205. The majority (63.3% / 33,679 dwellings) of the housing stock is single detached homes, with the second most common housing type being apartments under five stories (15.3% / 4,726 dwellings). The average number of bedrooms per dwelling is 2.76 with the majority (41.7%) being 3 bedrooms or 2 bedrooms (27.1%). Owners pay on average \$748 / month for housing costs compared to renters who pay an average of \$867 / month.

Approximately 8.2% of CBRM’s population (3,633 households) are in core housing need. A household is in core housing need if its housing does not meet one or more of the adequacy, suitability or affordability standards and it would have to spend 30% or more of its before-tax income to access acceptable local housing.

Approximately 4,330 (9.5%) homes are in need of major repairs and 7,124 households (16%) are spending 30% or more of their household income on shelter costs. While 30% of the average household income is \$1,889 / month, this reflects a household’s before tax income. CBRM’s affordability threshold for is likely far lower. Survey respondents consistently reported on the significant increase in housing costs in recent years due to population growth, lower residential vacancies, higher taxes, and higher electricity costs. The increasing cost of living has placed a burden on many CBRM households which directly contributes to housing insecurity.

Attribute	Benchmark		CA (225): Cape Breton, NS		
	PR: Nova Scotia, NS				
	value	percent	value	percent	index
HOUSING SUITABILITY					
Total number of occupied private dwellings by structural type of dwelling	455,208		45,592		
Suitable	439,568	96.56%	43,877	96.24%	100
Not suitable	15,640	3.44%	1,715	3.76%	109
MAINTENANCE					
Only regular maintenance or minor repairs needed	418,174	91.86%	41,261	90.50%	99
Major repairs needed	37,034	8.14%	4,330	9.50%	117
HOUSING COSTS					
Total number of owner and tenant households spending 30% or more of total household income on shelter costs	80,863	17.88%	7,124	16.03%	90
Total - Households with household income greater than zero and shelter-cost-to-income ratio less than 100%	452,246		44,430		
In core need	44,673	9.88%	3,633	8.18%	83
Not in core need	407,573	90.12%	40,797	91.82%	102
Owner households in non-farm, non-reserve private dwellings	301,836		31,562		
% of owner households spending 30% or more of total household income on shelter costs		7.52%		7.21%	96
% in core housing need		2.52%		1.28%	51
Average monthly shelter costs for owned dwellings \$	\$882.00		\$748.00		85
Tenant households in non-farm, non-reserve private dwellings	150,410		12,868		
% of tenant households in subsidized housing		8.58%		20.16%	235
% of tenant households spending 30% or more of total household income on shelter costs		31.78%		26.83%	84
% in core housing need		17.35%		12.73%	73
Average monthly shelter costs for rented dwellings \$	\$1,123.00		\$867.00		77

Summary of key housing figures (Source: FBM and Manifold Data Mining Inc, data vintage 2023/2024).

Interpretation: Header rows span all columns and are shown as bold black text. Each indented row represents a subset of the data above. For example, the 'tenant households in non-farm, non-reserve dwellings' row shows there are 12,868 tenant households in CBRM. All indented rows below that row reflect information about those households only.

Note: 'Non-farm' refers to all households which are not on farm lands.

Index	Description
>= 180	Extremely High
>=110 and <180	High
>=90 and <110	Similar
>=50 and <90	Low
<50	Extremely Low

What could be the vision for housing?

Throughout the first phase of engagement we asked community members “What’s your vision for housing?” Key themes that came up were:

- **Housing for all** – A variety of housing options are available for everyone including housing for students, seniors, families and those currently experiencing homelessness.
- **Affordable** – Less than 30% of income is spent on housing. Affordable housing options for a range of incomes are available.
- **Accessible** – Housing that meets the needs of those with accessibility requirements is available.
- **Equitable** – Housing for people with the greatest housing needs is prioritized.
- **Safe & Welcoming** – People are not exposed to hazards in their homes and feel welcome to live in the community.
- **Partnership & Advocacy** – CBRM partners with non-profits to enable affordable housing and advocates to other levels of government for supports.

At this stage we are sharing the elements the community has identified as important when creating a vision. These elements, along with research and best practices, will inform the vision for the Housing Strategy. As the project continues and further conversations are had with the community, the vision will continue to evolve. The vision will be used to develop goals, objectives, and action items in the Housing Strategy.

As we continue into phase 2, we will consider how the CBRM’s housing vision and Strategy can support a range of housing options including safety net housing, housing with supports and market housing (all the elements of the Housing Wheel). This work will build on the work of CBRM Forward in enabling more housing types and also CBRM’s Housing Accelerator Fund initiatives including pre-approved housing plans.



Housing Wheel (Source: City of Vernon, Housing Action Plan, 2023)

“Investments in good housing and in keeping people housed are also investments in the well-being of local residents”
- Leviten-Reid & Horel, *Living in Rental Units and Rooming Houses in the CBRM: Tenants And Tenant Experiences*, 2016

What’s next for this project?

In this report, we are sharing a summary of the information and data we have collected to date. As data is further examined, an updated report may be produced, or refined information may be used to develop the Housing Strategy.

In the second phase of the project, we will explore potential ways the municipality can incentivize residential development. This will involve reviewing case studies and applicable policy and regulations, as well as examining the financial feasibility of providing residential development incentives. Community and stakeholder engagement will also happen again in phase 2 & 3.

