

# Antigonish

NOVA SCOTIA'S FREE SPIRIT



## ANTIGONISH TOURISM STRATEGY

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## Acknowledgements

We acknowledge that the Antigonish Region is located in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq People. We are grateful to reside in this Region and appreciate the opportunity to welcome visitors. In the spirit of Reconciliation, we acknowledge our shared responsibility to both the Mi'kmaw Nation and Paqtnkek Mi'kmaw Nation.

It is important to recognize the valuable contribution of all those who participated in engagement and offered their insight, expertise, and passion for Antigonish.

Finally, it is appropriate to acknowledge the hardships of COVID on Antigonish residents and tourism partners. We are entering a new era of collaboration, and are emerging from these challenges stronger, and as one community.

## The Antigonish Tourism Strategy

### A Tourism Vision for Antigonish

Nova Scotia's leading non-urban, year-round overnight destination embraced by residents and visitors alike.

### Value Proposition

Nova Scotia's leading non-urban tourism destination: renowned for its welcoming, forward-thinking, and dynamic communities that embrace and celebrate diversity – Nova Scotia's Free Spirit.

### Strategic Framework

The Antigonish Tourism Strategy framework is organized under five strategic directions – or pillars. Tourism partners were clear in messaging the imperative for strategic ambition and accordingly the strategic objectives will be activated over a three year timeframe.

#### *Strategic Direction #1: Lead and Grow with Purpose*

Aligned with the creation of a new DMO and the launch of its inaugural tourism strategy, develop internal systems including governance and administration to support the strategy resourcing and activation.

- Develop a financial sustainability plan – including revenue sources and income generators.
- Establish a 3% marketing levy through Town and County municipal by-laws designating Destination Antigonish as the official marketing agency for the Region.<sup>i</sup>
- Refine and formally adopt the Destination Antigonish governance<sup>ii</sup> structure reflecting leadership from the municipalities, tourism operators, partners, and investors, including mandate focused sub-committees (e.g., Marketing, Communications, Events, Resident Engagement, among others).
- Develop a 3–5-year business plan for Destination Antigonish leveraging the marketing levy as a foundational revenue generator to be supplemented through partner investments for project-based initiatives. The plan will also reflect how Destination Antigonish can grow staffing as the demands of local partners increase.
- Ensure all Destination Antigonish decisions are grounded in research. As a first step develop a tourism measurement and monitoring system to support accountability and responsibility top residents, partners, and investors.

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## *Strategic Direction #2: Foster a Spirit of Collaboration and Partnership*

Embrace a collective impact approach to support maximum impact through coordination and collaboration among all partners – including tourism operators, tourism partners, investors, social enterprises, municipalities).

- Foster positive relationships and communication among all Destination Antigonish partners.
- Leverage municipal, provincial and federal initiatives appropriately aligned with Destination Antigonish priorities reflecting tourism as well as focused creative industries and environmental initiatives.
- Promote package development and promotion among Destination Antigonish partners including the Tourism Antigonish Partnership and where beneficial - external partners.

## *Strategic Direction #3: Positively Impact all Communities*

Leverage and strengthen the region's sustainability leadership on social, environmental, and related matters to grow tourism while enriching the lives of residents.

- Improve the lives of Antigonish town and country residents through tourism while balancing economic objectives (e.g., through tourism business revenues and municipal tax receipts) with social and environmental priorities (including alignment with a net zero ambition).
- Ensure an equity, diversity and inclusion approach is reflected in all Destination Antigonish initiatives.
- Commit to supporting and collaborating with Paqtnkek Mi'kmaw Nation.
- Assess the need for increased municipal leadership around short term rental regulation considering local housing affordability and availability; preserving community character; safety among other factors.<sup>iii</sup>
- Develop, adopt and implement a locals know campaign to ensure residents 1) Understand the value of tourism to the community and its residents; and 2) Are equipped to help visitors fully appreciate and experience what Destination Antigonish has to offer.

## *Strategic Direction #4: Marketing and Communications to Position Antigonish as Nova Scotia's Free Spirit*

Promote the Region's compelling visitor value proposition to priority markets.

- Develop a marketing and communications plan.
- Manage and grow the Antigonish brand.
- Grow and manage digital assets.

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- Convert more drive-by traffic to visitation.
- Support niche market growth - including in culinary, outdoor and culture, among others.
- Develop and enhance compelling shoulder and winter tourism initiatives for the Region.
- Develop a Destination Antigonish website to support visitor attraction, boosting length of stay and trip planning.
- Develop a corporate Destination Antigonish website to support partner communication and engagement along with network growth.
- Develop a social media plan to boost engagement between and among industry partners and visitors.

## *Strategic Direction #5: Purposefully Grow the Festival and Event Sector*

Grow the region into a year round destination by further strengthening the Region's compelling value proposition around event hosting to achieve its full potential.

- Coordinate and consolidate event bidding, planning, and hosting resources to boost competitiveness.
- Develop a mechanism to dynamically coordinate and profile festivals, events, and related activities.
- Identify a sustainable funding source to support sector investment including for bidding and hosting.
- Foster relationship and partnership building with Events Nova Scotia.
- Develop an inventory of event related assets.
- Identify local leaders and influencers potentially positioned to lead bids with both confidence and a competitive advantage.
- Develop an event tool kit that supports local bid groups and enables them to bid with confidence and customize as needed.

## 1 Background and Context

The Destination Antigonish Work Group is comprised of partners including Destination Eastern and Northumberland Shores (DEANS), Paqtnkek Mi'kmaw Nation, St. Francis Xavier University (StFX), the Antigonish Chamber of Commerce, the Town of Antigonish and the Municipality of the County of Antigonish. **The Destination Antigonish Working Group oversaw the development of the Destination Antigonish Tourism Strategy.** The Group ATN team was commissioned to develop a tourism strategy for the region to increase tourism activity and visitor yields while supporting tourism operators in growing their capacity.

### 1.1 Project Objectives

The Destination Antigonish Tourism Strategy assignment encompassed the development of an integrated tourism strategy reflecting strategic directions, sustainable sources of revenue, and governance. Related deliverables (under separate cover) focused on the development of a brand, logo, and related digital assets.

### 1.2 Methodology

**Multiple lines of research were employed to underpin the strategic analysis inherent in the development of the Antigonish Tourism Strategic Plan.** A critical element of the strategic planning process was robust outreach and engagement. This engagement was bolstered by research into tourism trends, best practices, relevant initiatives currently underway or under consideration, and related secondary research.

The multiple lines of research and engagement undertaken in this work provide a strong foundation for the strategy. Robust engagement with respect to the development of the strategic plan and subsequently to its activation is a critical success factor. This approach reflects the fundamental importance of engagement not only being done well but also being seen to be done well. Engagement is a critical component of a strategy that will leverage collective impact to optimize success involving diverse partners.

The outreach and engagement process for the tourism strategy was carried out in three distinct stages. Stage one consisted of 13 virtual interviews with key officials and tourism stakeholders in the Antigonish Region. These in-depth interviews lasted an hour on average. (The supporting Outreach and Engagement Plan was delivered under separate cover.)

Building on the bilateral interviews, the second phase of the engagement process involved facilitating five community listening / working sessions, with three of these structured as in-person events, with the remaining two held virtually. At these sessions, participants were given a brief

presentation providing details on the project as well as selected research findings. The community sessions focused on the following key questions:

- What is your vision for Destination Antigonish in 2033?
  - What does success look like?
  - What might the community look like?
  - What is the Antigonish tourism draw?
- What are the strategic priorities for Destination Antigonish?
  - Short-term focus?
  - Key partners?
- What are the key tourism assets for Destination Antigonish?
- What are your thoughts on the current Antigonish brand? How should the brand evolve?

The final stage of the engagement process consisted of an online survey available to all Antigonish Region tourism stakeholders and residents. This survey was promoted during the community engagement sessions, as well as through Town and County social media channels. Engagement input was bolstered through this widely shared survey that generated 215 responses. (Detailed survey findings are available under separate cover.)

Engagement findings provided critical insights into the creation of the Antigonish Tourism Strategy.

## 2 Summary of Findings

This section presents a summary of findings from the research, strategic analysis, and engagement.

### 2.1 Research Context

The following situation analysis for the Destination Antigonish Tourism Strategy outlines the planning context through online research, document reviews, inventories, and tourism activity statistics. The analysis reflects the national, provincial, and local context for tourism strategic planning in support of the Destination Antigonish Tourism Strategy. (Detailed research findings are available under separate cover.)

## 2.2 National Context

In 2019, prior to the onset of the pandemic, the Canadian tourism industry experienced record-breaking tourism revenues. This was then immediately followed by the onset of the pandemic, resulting in tremendous losses and challenges for the industry as borders closed and travel restrictions were adopted globally.

However, despite these significant losses and the persistence of COVID, the Canadian tourism industry is showing promising signs of recovery with the lifting of travel restrictions and the release of pent-up demand into the sector.

According to releases from Destination Canada, interest in visiting the country has seen spikes even higher than in 2019 across multiple key global markets. Web searches related to Canadian tourism from the US, Europe, and the Asia-Pacific regions surpassed 2019, particularly following the removal of pre-arrival testing requirements.

Reports suggest the tourism sector nationally is rebounding from its pandemic-induced downturn, with moderate revenue growth expected to continue into 2023 as operators adjust pricing and return to 2019 visitation.

Despite encouraging signs of resilience, there is lingering uncertainty in the sector. Business travel has been impacted by pandemic uncertainty. Global recovery in business travel has been slower than the leisure sector, with current predictions suggesting global business travel spending will not reach 2019 figures until 2025 or 2026. The slower recovery for business travel has been attributed to the increased use of virtual meeting tools by businesses around the globe and the elevated risk of business trip cancellations.

Other industry challenges influencing the recovery of Canadian tourism include:

- A lack of access to transportation, both air and ground (e.g., car rental availability).
- Higher overall costs for travel.
- Quality assurance concerns; and
- Reduced access to capital and limited liquidity.

Despite these factors, Canada's tourism industry continues on the road to recovery, albeit at uncertain rates. Destination Canada has predicted that even under a fully realized worst-case scenario, international tourism to Canada will still likely fully recover by 2026. The 2022 revenue growth is expected to continue into 2023.

As the industry continues to recover, new market trends are expected to influence the industry, including the following:<sup>iv</sup>

- A greater desire for frictionless travel, with increased use of digital technology and smoother travel experiences.

- Increasing domestic travel, as Canadians avoid uncertainty overseas and seek to make up for lost time with friends and family, additionally causing an increase in demand to traditionally less-travelled areas of the country.
- A greater focus on the socio-environmental elements surrounding the impacts of tourism, with increased emphasis on minimizing its environmental impact.
- This shift away from an overriding economic imperative to more socially responsible tourism also includes a greater emphasis on resident well-being, safety and overall community quality of life.
- A need to further support Indigenous-led and operated tourism to fully take advantage of a growing demand among domestic and international travellers.
- A surge of travellers looking to experience Canada's natural offerings by visiting nature-based destinations and taking part in nature-based activities.
- A growing segment interested in travelling for physical and mental wellness.
- Pent-up demand among high-yield travellers.
- Increased leisure time among some travellers; and
- Extended destination stays enabled by remote work.

## **Nova Scotia Context**

Much like Canada as a whole, Nova Scotia's tourism sector has experienced both significant disruption and promising recovery. The province's tourism industry showed a strong recovery in 2022, welcoming an additional one million visitors compared to the previous year. Accommodation sales in all regions of the province surpassed pre-pandemic levels.

Nova Scotia welcomed 1.9 non-resident visitors in 2022. While a significant improvement over 2021, visitation did not return to pre-pandemic levels, ending the year with a decline of 18% compared with 2019. Atlantic Canada continued to account for the highest share of visitors. However, regional visitation didn't recover to the same extent as other markets, like Ontario, which was up 1% over 2019.<sup>v</sup>

The disproportionate growth in room nights relative to out-of-province visitation suggested that resident travel within Nova Scotia is strong.

Overall, Nova Scotia is highly regarded by Canadian travellers, with a solid majority of domestic travellers endorsing the province's many offerings. Some of the most cited attributes include the province's outdoor appeal, charming towns/communities, and its relaxing/leisurely appeal. Concurrently, while Nova Scotians became apprehensive of tourists entering the province during the pandemic, this hesitation has significantly decreased since 2022.<sup>vi</sup> Tourism Nova Scotia

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identifies three priority market segments for the province using Explorer Quotient market segmentation as summarized below.<sup>vii viii ix x</sup>

*Table 1: Tourism Nova Scotia's Priority Market Segments*

	Authentic Experiences	Cultural Explorers	Free Spirits
<b>Traits:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spontaneous</li> <li>• Discrete</li> <li>• Ethical</li> <li>• Eco-Conscious</li> <li>• Independent</li> <li>• Open-Minded</li> <li>• Curious</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive</li> <li>• Open-Minded</li> <li>• Curious</li> <li>• Risk-Taker</li> <li>• Flexible</li> <li>• Easy-Going</li> <li>• Energetic</li> <li>• Creative</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open-Minded</li> <li>• Ambitious</li> <li>• Enthusiastic</li> <li>• Fun-Loving</li> <li>• Adventurous</li> <li>• Curious</li> <li>• Social</li> </ul>
<b>Ideal Attractions:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nature Reserves</li> <li>• World Heritage Sites</li> <li>• Hiking Trails</li> <li>• Museums</li> <li>• Homestays</li> <li>• Campsites</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Heritage Sites</li> <li>• Cultural Events</li> <li>• Museums</li> <li>• Festivals</li> <li>• B&amp;Bs</li> <li>• Hostels</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Luxury Hotels</li> <li>• Tourism Hot Spots</li> <li>• Top Restaurants</li> <li>• Night Clubs</li> <li>• Group Tours</li> </ul>
<b>Travel Values:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning about places, times, and cultures</li> <li>• Enjoying vast Natural Settings and Wonders</li> <li>• Prefer integrating into the local culture</li> <li>• Personal Development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prefers travelling with like-minded people</li> <li>• Enjoying ancient history and modern culture</li> <li>• Learning about places, times, and cultures</li> <li>• Always planning for their next trip</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enjoys experiencing a bit of everything</li> <li>• Always planning for their next trip</li> <li>• Prefers travelling with like-minded people</li> <li>• Seeks the best they can afford</li> </ul>

## *Tourism Trends*

Room sales across Nova Scotia followed a similar path of recovery, with sales dropping significantly with the onset of the pandemic while seeing significant growth and renewal by 2022.

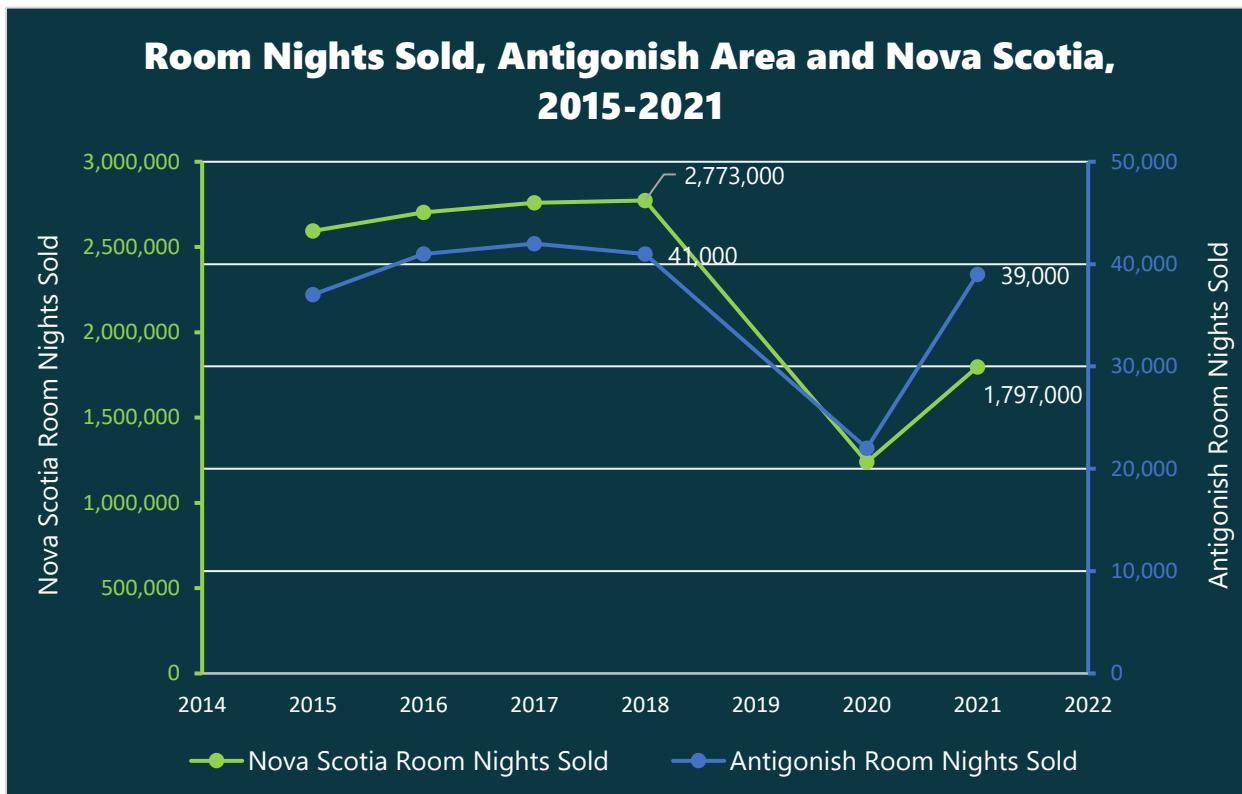
Despite the sector's promising recovery, several challenges remain for Nova Scotia attracting Canadian travellers. As of 2022, Canadian tourists perceived the cost of travel to Nova Scotia as high (34%), the distance being too great (25%) and one in five (20%) noted a lack of familiarity with Atlantic Canada.<sup>xi</sup>

## **Antigonish Context**

Room night sales in Antigonish provide insights into the scale of tourism and related trends compared to the rest of the province. As shown in the following chart, Antigonish room sales generally followed the same trends as the rest of the province. As can be seen in 2020 room sales data, while Antigonish experienced a significant loss compared to pre-pandemic figures, this loss

was less severe than was experienced by Nova Scotia as a whole. Antigonish managed to maintain over 50% of its pre-COVID room sales.

Figure 1: Annual % change of Room Nights Sold for both Antigonish County and Nova Scotia



Preliminary room sales estimates for Antigonish suggest that this general trend continued through 2022, with Antigonish room night sales continuing to increase.

## 3 Strategic Alignment

The tourism plans adopted by several Nova Scotia entities provide valuable context for developing the Antigonish Tourism Strategy. These plans were analyzed to identify opportunities while ensuring strategic alignment between tourism initiatives, which will support efficiencies and leverage partnerships throughout the province. The following tourism strategies are profiled:

- Antigonish Regional Economic Assessment - addresses tourism, highlighting opportunities for collaboration and positioning Antigonish in the broader Nova Scotia tourism context.
- Paqtnkek Tourism Strategy - highlights opportunities related to Paqtnkek's heritage and natural assets, while considering increasing interest in Indigenous cultural tourism.

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- DEANS Tourism Strategy - identifies four foundational pillars: destination marketing, visitor services, partnership development and events.
- Nova Scotia Culture Action Plan - outlines priority themes regarding the protection, promotion, and development of Nova Scotia's culture.
- Destination Canada's Tourism Vision outlines a Canada-wide approach to support post-COVID touristic recovery between 2022-2025.
- Nova Scotia Tourism Strategy (currently in development).
- The Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada (ITAC) Strategy focuses on post-COVID tourism recovery.
- Nova Scotia Indigenous Tourism Enterprise Network (NSITEN) recognizes the importance of strengthening partnerships and attracting new investment; and
- The Cultural Tourism Strategy for the Mi'kmaw of NS - highlights the importance of experience development – particularly post-COVID.

Considering these plans will ensure strategic alignment while acting as a force multiplier for Destination Antigonish. (More detailed strategic analysis is available under separate cover.)

## 4 What We Heard

Through engagement efforts with Antigonish officials, residents, and tourism operators, valuable insights into the strengths, perceived gaps, and opportunities for Antigonish as a tourism destination emerged. These insights are explored in this section.

### Regional Cooperation

Throughout the engagement, participants stressed the importance of cooperation and coordination across the Antigonish tourism sector.

Participants suggested a central tourism body would reduce or even eliminate instances where tourism initiatives were fragmented or duplicated. Greater coordination would help bolster

*"We need to work together, or the strategy will never succeed."*

resources available to a collective effort. Some participants believed past efforts fell short of expectations for these reasons.

Importantly, increased coordination would help to ensure partnership opportunities were more effectively communicated – opening up valuable resources to Antigonish tourism operators. As an illustration of this point, some operators only became aware of opportunities through the outreach and engagement process associated with this initiative.

Further, many engagement participants believed that a key step in addressing this issue would be through a unified vision for Antigonish. This perspective offered a compelling endorsement for the development of the Tourism Strategy.

A commonly cited objective was to move the region away from its current status as a brief stop for visitors travelling to and from Cape Breton by positioning Antigonish as an overnight or even multi-day destination.

A related benefit of a unified approach to tourism for the region would ensure greater profile and recognition of the industry's considerable value for the region - particularly in the context of more visible industries in the region.

*"They can see the university, they can see the hospital, but they can't see the impact of all the tourism businesses in the Region."*

There was also a strong belief that greater coordination would also unlock new investment in regional tourism – including from the private sector. Stakeholders recounted how a lack of multi-year budget commitments for past projects resulted in promising and important tourism developments being curtailed when they required more than a year to demonstrate success.

## Nature-Based Experiences

When discussing the tourism draws Antigonish currently has established, the region's natural beauty and outdoor experiences were often cited as significant resources for future efforts to build off from. Of the many options available, two which were repeatedly singled out were Antigonish's beaches, and the Keppoch Mountain site.

*"Let's promote our community to younger families and target outdoor enthusiasts on their way to Cape Breton."*

### *Beaches*

When asked what Antigonish had to offer visitors, its beaches were often the first attribute mentioned by participants. Further, many stakeholders cited the region's warmer water compared to other areas of Nova Scotia.

However, stakeholders also identified a number of constraints currently preventing beaches from realizing their full tourism value. The first of these was accessibility. Stakeholders suggested that public beach access is becoming increasingly difficult - particularly for those beaches near the Town. Much of this diminished access was attributed to private property owners restricting passage to public beaches. It was noted that, this challenge could be partially mitigated through improved visitor signage and wayfinding for alternative public pathways. On a related matter, beach cleanliness was raised by multiple participants with several examples of beaches marred by litter and fishing debris.

While the beaches remain a compelling natural asset, engagement suggests that promotion and protection will be necessary to unlock their full tourism potential.

### *Keppoch and Hiking*

Keppoch Mountain and its associated amenities were also frequently mentioned in the context of Antigonish's most important tourism assets. Participants noted Keppoch's appeal to visitors in general as well as niche markets such as biking enthusiasts. Some participants also pointed to Keppoch's potential leadership around packaged tourism experiences and the Keppoch team's sophisticated understanding of tourism development.

Some suggestions were offered regarding how to further improve Keppoch as a tourist draw. These included working to connect the Keppoch trails to other regional networks and developing resources to help visitors plan and prepare to get the most out of their stay at the mountain.

*"Nature has provided us with great scenery and beaches that should be preserved."*

Hiking - both at Keppoch and the region as a whole, was also commonly cited as a significant visitors draw. This aligns with the ongoing ambitious efforts to further develop the region's active transportation network.

## Paqtnkek Mi'kmaw Nation

Throughout the engagement, the importance of continued cooperation on tourism-related matters between Antigonish and the Paqtnkek Mi'kmaw Nation was enthusiastically endorsed. Participants universally acknowledged the importance and value of the partnership between Paqtnkek, tourism operators, governments, and the community at large. The contemporary significance is amplified within the context of Reconciliation. Overall, there was a strong desire among all partners for authentic and respectful cooperation in the tourism sector.

The growing interest in authentic experiential Indigenous tourism among both residents and visitors was acknowledged. Several opportunities for cooperation were identified. For example, the StFX University community and diaspora – including international students, were highlighted for their interest in learning more about the Nation, its history, and its traditions.

Arising from the discussions was a communication opportunity to build a greater understanding among non-indigenous locals and visitors regarding the option of attending Paqtnkek Nation events. Considering the success of the Paqtnkek powwow hosted by StFX in April 2023, there is great optimism around further building cultural awareness and confidence among non-community members.

Several critical points from the Paqtnkek perspective were shared during the engagement. Overall, Paqtnkek is highly motivated to develop Mi'kmaw tourism, while cooperating with Antigonish partners to ensure their story is appropriately told. An ongoing dialogue between the Paqtnkek and the Town and County regarding the implementation of Mi'kmaw signage was referenced as an important waypoint in this journey.

Engagement participants were mindful of the imperative of Mi'kmaw cultural tourism being led, developed, and delivered by Paqtnkek. This includes evolving and strengthening the Mi'kmaw narrative currently reflected in Antigonish. For example, it was felt that the story and history Antigonish currently shares with visitors provide insufficient attention to the Paqtnkek perspective, and the importance of the nation as the Region's first inhabitants.

## A Rich History Combined With a Vibrant Present

*"I have been visiting Antigonish since early 1990s. I love its authenticity."*

Throughout the engagement process, Antigonish's rich multicultural history was described as foundational to the region's identity and its tourism value proposition. The Antigonish region is steeped in the stories rooted in the diversity of its residents – including as the ancestral home

of the Mi'kmaq People and the compelling story of the Paqtnkek Mi'kmaw Nation. While the region's Scottish history was frequently mentioned along with the annual Highland Games, participants recognized the imperative to promote the stories and heritage reflecting the region's

rich diversity, including African Nova Scotians and, more recently, refugees from the conflicts in Syria and Ukraine.

This multicultural history has evolved into a contemporary source of pride for the region. This pride has been further elevated by the region's international success stories such as the journey of the Hadhad Family as Syrian refugees who settled in Antigonish and established Peace by Chocolate.

A spirit of welcoming and inclusion is core to Antigonish's identity, some stakeholders firmly advocated for further efforts to address exclusion. While most residents were described as welcoming, there are opportunities for improvement. Some newcomers described feeling like an outsider despite living in the region for some time. In some cases, this was exacerbated by frustration that this experience was not acknowledged.

Another key aspect of the region's identity is its general acceptance and safety. Participants frequently expressed the importance of Antigonish being seen as welcoming and safe to all – both during the day and night.

*"We have it all - we just need to put it together."*

## Culinary Related Offerings

Antigonish's significance as a hub for high-quality diverse dining and food options was highlighted by many stakeholders including:

- A wide range of restaurants offering diverse culinary options.
- A popular farmers market supporting a strong local food movement and providing easy access to high quality, locally grown foods, and related goods; and
- A robust craft brewery and artisanal alcohol sector, catering to the growing demand for related experiences.

A noteworthy historical influence on Antigonish's unique culinary strengths arose from the Dutch settlers' field to fork ethos post WWII. Other food-related offerings discussed, such as Peace by Chocolate, provide high-quality visitor offerings and a deeper connection to the town's social and cultural fabric.

## Events

Engagement participants were enthusiastic about Antigonish's potential as an event hub. Much of this excitement stemmed from the signature annual events Antigonish currently hosts on an annual basis, as well as major one-time events Antigonish had hosted in the past.

The most cited event, in terms of both past success and future tourism potential, was the Antigonish Highland Games. Participants often directly connected the games with the cultural and historical aspects of Antigonish and its Scottish history, with those who believed said heritage

should serve as a pillar of Antigonish tourism moving forward always including the promotion and expansion of the Highland Games within their vision. While most participants praised the Highland Games as a cultural and tourism asset of great importance, some opportunities for further development were also noted. Connecting with the previously raised issue of remaining alienation, some participants expressed a belief that the intense focus placed on the Highland Games resulted in those not interested in the Games feeling further excluded or left without things to do while the event took place. Others, even those who professed significant affection for the Games, believed that the cost of entry to the event was no longer reflecting the value of the event itself, especially at specific times when vendors were closed, and only certain events were ongoing.

While the Highland Games were the most cited event throughout the engagement process, both the Antigonish Jazz Festival and the Nova Scotia Summerfest were similarly referenced by multiple engagement participants as important success stories and opportunities for further growth. Similarly, Antigonish's hosting of the 2018 Summer Special Olympics was commonly referenced as a point of pride for the region, and as proof of the region's potential as a major event host and hub.

Scheduling was noted as an opportunity for the Antigonish Region to grow as an events hub. Stakeholders noted that, in the past, some of Antigonish's largest events were scheduled for similar times – even overlapped at times. An opportunity for a more coordinated impactful schedule of events was frequently noted. This coordination further aligns with a desire for the Antigonish Region to develop into a year-round destination with events hosted in all seasons. Year-round events would open new markets while strengthening demand outside the traditional tourism period. While there are many advantages to flattening the seasonality curve, it is also important to note that this squarely aligns with the Nova Scotia tourism strategy.

## Tourism Infrastructure

The potential for enhanced accommodation options was noted during the engagement. For example, increased accommodation supply would enable Antigonish to host more and larger

*"We need to adapt to evolving visitor expectations."*

sporting events. While the Region is bolstered by existing sporting and recreation infrastructure, there were some concerns that the room supply was insufficient for players, families, spectators, and officials. Additional accommodation capacity would also open further growth opportunities for established events. Other participants noted that Antigonish's accommodations offerings were not always aligned with the requirements of Tourism Nova Scotia's priority market segments.

Participants shared considerations for updating and expanding the accommodations offered throughout Antigonish. StFX University's capacity and potential to grow as an accommodations provider was recognized. At the same time, there was a widespread recognition of the importance

of a level playing field for traditional accommodation operators. Several participants also noted the option of bolstering sharing economy opportunities, such as Airbnb and VRBO. However, others reflected on the importance of aligning this and other decisions with resident preferences, social considerations, and access to housing for current and prospective residents.

## Attraction of New Residents

While the majority of engagement input focused on attracting first-time and return visitors to the Antigonish Region, some participants also noted the important role memorable tourism experiences and related amenities can play in enticing individuals to relocate to Antigonish permanently or for a remote working hiatus.

Additionally, by strengthening Antigonish's position as a full-day, or multi-day, tourism destination, as opposed to a simple stop on the way to other Nova Scotian destinations, there will be a greater opportunity for tourists to experience and witness the deeper and more everyday benefits of life in Antigonish. These include the community's friendliness, safety, multiple dining, beverage and recreation options, housing, and education offerings, all of which are far more difficult to ascertain during a visit of less than a full day in length.

## Marketing and Communication

Engagement participants offered suggestions on marketing approaches. Several opportunities were identified for how Antigonish may best market itself as an attractive tourist destination, and how the region's offerings and activities may be best communicated to both visitors and residents.

During the various stages of the engagement process, participants were asked to describe what they believe Antigonish's current tourism brand was, or what it should be moving forward. The following themes emerged for the Antigonish Region:

- A diverse, accepting, and safe place with something for everyone.
- Small community feel with big city amenities.
- Home to StFX; and
- A hub of events, outdoor adventures, and culinary experiences.

However, it is also important to acknowledge that there is a diversity of perspectives on the Antigonish identity. The engagement uncovered an opportunity to create a more compelling and focused identity for the region. This would have the added benefit of addressing challenges that visitors and prospective visitors have expressed in researching travel-related information for the Region.

Another area of possible development which was raised during the engagement efforts was that of centralizing information regarding activities and services, for the benefit of both visitors and

operators. It became evident during engagement that tourism partners were not always aware of the tourism partnership programs and resources available to them. A related example that was raised during engagement was the opportunity to consolidate a comprehensive resource in support of hiking and walking trails throughout the Antigonish Region.

Engagement participants also noted the opportunity to educate locals about Antigonish's activities and offerings. By ensuring *locals know* and appreciate available tourist offerings in the Region, residents will be better able to provide detailed information and recommendations to visitors. This approach would offer the added benefit of further boosting Antigonish's image as a friendly and welcoming destination.

## Partnerships

Tourism partnership opportunities were mentioned as a rich opportunity. Many of the examples shared involved event hosts and tourism operators. A practical example was improved communication and coordination of events to ensure restaurants were prepared for the potential influx of patrons. Another opportunity was co-branding tourism offerings with events to leverage cross-promotion potential. Each of these examples connects to the larger opportunity for Antigonish's tourism operators to better unify and cooperate under a shared goal. Participants embraced an approach where operators were competitively cooperating to grow the tourism market for Antigonish.

Discussions with operations throughout the region also identified significant opportunities and interest in tourism packages. By improving partnerships between the region's various tourism operators, Antigonish's activities, experiences, and services for visitors could be combined into convenient, marketable travel packages.

# ANTIGONISH TOURISM STRATEGY

## 5 Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> The levy will apply to all short-term tourism rentals (regardless of size) including traditional tourist accommodation (e.g., hotels, motels, inns, cabins, designated university accommodation, etc.) and sharing economy platforms (e.g., Airbnb and VRBO) registered with the Nova Scotia Tourist Accommodations Registry.

<sup>ii</sup> Research and the experience of others affirms that governance will be critically important. As one of the first steps in strategic activation, recruiting the right leadership and development of a focused, streamlined governance structure for Destination Antigonish will be critical to its success. It is expected that governance will continue to be refined and clarified in the formative stage of the strategy.

<sup>iii</sup> Best practices research is grounded in the recognition that regulatory considerations vary by community. Some communities may have a greater motivation to contribute to tourism accommodation supply, while others may have a greater focus on affordable housing supply.

<sup>iv</sup> Destination Canada, "Tourism's Big Shift"

<sup>v</sup> [tourismnsc.ca/news/intouch-blog/strong-tourism-recovery-2022](https://tourismnsc.ca/news/intouch-blog/strong-tourism-recovery-2022)

<sup>vi</sup> Destination Canada, "Resident Sentiment October 2022"

<sup>vii</sup> Tourism Nova Scotia, "Traveller Segmentation"

<sup>viii</sup> "Traveler Type: Authentic Experiencer"

<sup>ix</sup> "Traveler Type: Cultural Explorer"

<sup>x</sup> "Traveler Type: Free Spirit"

<sup>xi</sup> Tourism Nova Scotia, "Atlantic Canada 2022 Travel Study"