

Former Salmon River Elementary School Property

Report And Recommendation



October 2022



Introduction.....	1
Property Background.....	1
<i>Figure 1: Property Map</i>	1
Proposed Concepts for the property.....	1
<i>Figure 2: 3 Design Concepts</i>	2
Concept 1: 100% Park Space.....	2
Concept 2: 60% Park Space + 40% Housing.....	2
Concept 3: 40% Park Space + 60% Housing.....	2
Engagement Process.....	3
<i>Figure 3: Project Timeline and Engagement Process</i>	3
Staff Team.....	3
Survey.....	3
Virtual Engagement Session.....	4
In-Person Engagement Session.....	4
Results.....	4
Survey Findings.....	4
Community Meeting Results.....	5
<i>Figure 4: Community Responses to Design Concepts</i>	5
<i>Table 1: Main Arguments for and Against Design Options</i>	6
Presentations:.....	6
Documents and Plans to Consider.....	7
Policies of Council.....	7
Central Colchester Municipal Planning Strategy (MPS - 2002):.....	7
Municipal Parkland Strategy (2002):.....	8
Service Delivery Strategy (1997):.....	8
Affordable Housing Needs and Supply Study (2021).....	8
Municipality of the County of Colchester Community Energy and Emissions Plan (2021).....	9
Cost Considerations:.....	9
Recommendation.....	10

Former Salmon River Elementary School Property

Report and Recommendation

Introduction

The former Salmon River Elementary School property is a 16-acre lot currently owned by the Municipality and used by the surrounding community for passive recreational activity. Interest from the community prompted municipal staff to launch a survey in fall 2021 to explore options for the future of the site. Over the past year, staff have carried out community engagement exercises along with research on issues regarding housing and sustainability to determine future considerations for this property. The process concludes with a staff recommendation for Council’s consideration.

Property Background

The former Salmon River Elementary School property was acquired by the County after the school closed in 2008 and request for proposals was issued in 2009 however, no responses were received. The property was leased to RCMP for training in 2012 and retained for potential future use by the Municipality. The school was demolished in 2017 and the land has remained vacant since with some local recreational use. In 2021, the Municipality started to do some light maintenance of the property.



Figure 1: Property Map

Proposed Concepts for the property

After analyzing survey data, municipal staff created three design concepts to prompt discussion for the engagement process. These designs incorporated the preferred uses and features

survey respondents showed interest in. The designs are intended to be conceptual only and are not representative of any decisions made by staff or Council.

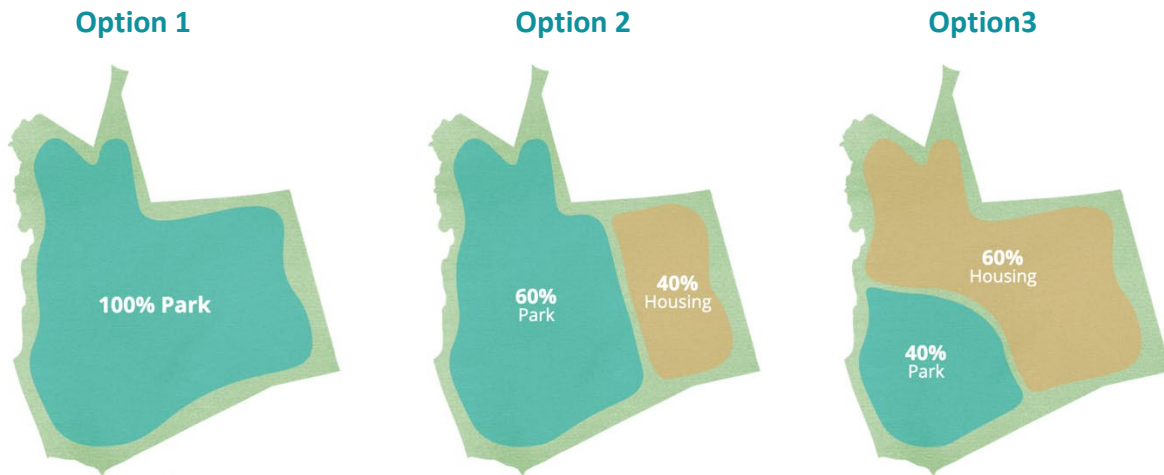


Figure 2: 3 Design Concepts

Concept 1: 100% Park Space

The first concept would be an elevated version of how the property is utilized today. This would be used for 100% recreational purposes and include park amenities such as seating, trails, waste disposal, parking, gardens. Residents also showed interest in a playground and off-leash dog park.

Concept 2: 60% Park Space + 40% Housing

This concept explores the idea of a “Pocket Neighbourhood”, a neighbourhood design style which focuses on communal space, affordable housing, and a diversity of housing types. In this concept, housing would take up 40% of the property, while the other 60% would be dedicated park space including the same amenities identified in concept 1.

Concept 3: 40% Park Space + 60% Housing

The third concept incorporates more traditional neighborhood design, focusing on single family home development. 60% of the property is utilized for housing while 40% is reserved for park space.

The three concepts were intended to stimulate community discussions at the on-line and in person open house sessions held in May of 2022.

Engagement Process

The engagement process consisted of a public survey, and community engagement sessions available both online and in person. Figure 3 outlines a timeline of this process.



Figure 3: Project Timeline and Engagement Process

Staff Team

In Fall 2021 a group of municipal staff members was established to facilitate the engagement process of the former school property. This team includes three planners, two recreation staff members, and the Municipality’s engagement coordinator.

Survey

In October 2021, a community survey was conducted to gauge Salmon River residents’ thoughts on the future of this property. The survey was launched October 19th, 2021, and closed November 12th, being active for 25 days. The survey was available online (www.colchester.ca) and in print format by direct mail (upon request) or available for pick up at the Municipal Office (1 Church St.). It could also be completed with County staff over the phone or in person.

The residents were made aware of the survey through a geo-targeted direct-mail campaign involving post cards delivered to 1,470 homes in the greater Salmon River area. It was later learned that households who opt not to receive promotional mail, did not receive the post card. Advertisement was also conducted through the Municipality’s website (www.colchester.ca), and promoted through social media (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) and advertisements in Truro News and the Colchester Wire.

193 surveys were completed. This survey was intended to develop a deeper understanding of the current uses and the types of future uses residents would like to see made of this property. Based on the survey results, staff created three potential design concepts that would be used in future engagement activities.

Virtual Engagement Session

On Tuesday May 10th, the Municipality hosted a virtual engagement session via zoom. Residents were made aware of the community meetings with a geo-targeted direct-mail campaign involving postcards delivered to 2197 household in the greater Salmon River area. This time the Municipality was able to override Canada Post's exclusion of those who opt not to receive promotional mail. All households therefore received the post card and were made aware of the meetings.

This session was led by staff who shared a presentation outlining a brief overview of the property, key survey results, and the three design concepts. Attendees were given the opportunity to share their thoughts through a facilitated discussion. Additionally, at the end of the meeting, a link to an online form was emailed to all attendees where they could share additional thoughts or if they chose to not speak at the session. 10 people attended this session and 25 people responded to the online form.

In-Person Engagement Session

On Wednesday May 18th, staff held an in-person engagement session at Harmony Heights Elementary School. 39 community members attended, including Mayor Blair, Deputy Mayor Stewart and Councilor Johnson. This session presented the same presentation from the previous virtual meeting. Attendees were given the opportunity to share thoughts and ideas through discussion with the group, filling out a handout, participating in a sticky note activity with the design concepts, and could speak with staff directly.

Results

Survey Findings

Full survey report found in attached document

- 35% of respondents visit the property at least once a month and 62% either rarely or never use it.
- The top three uses for the property currently are walking, letting your dog run, and winter activities.
- If housing were considered for this property, residents were most interested in traditional single-family homes, multi-unit (townhouses), and/or small affordable housing/cluster housing.

- The top five park features residents are interested in for this property are walking trails/paths, playground, benches/picnic tables, sledding hill, and parking.
- 39% of respondents were interested in a mix of park space and housing and 39% were not. 22% were not sure or did not respond.

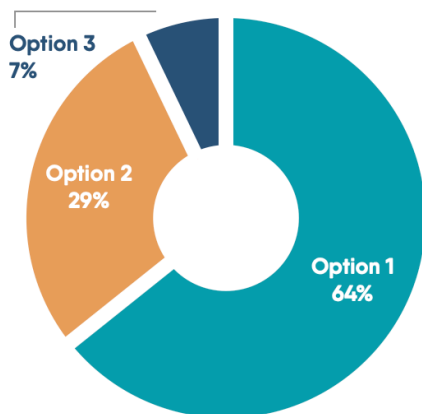
Community Meeting Results

Detailed chart of all attendee responses found in attached document

Attendees were given the opportunity to comment on each design concept. Municipal staff took these responses and compiled them to analyze. Through the process of coding this data, staff highlighted some of the key points for and against potential uses of this site. Figure 3 highlights attendees expressed interest in each concept in both the virtual and in person sessions.

Virtual Engagement Session

Attendees interest in each design concept
Responses: 25



In Person Engagement Session

Attendees interest in each design concept
Responses: 10

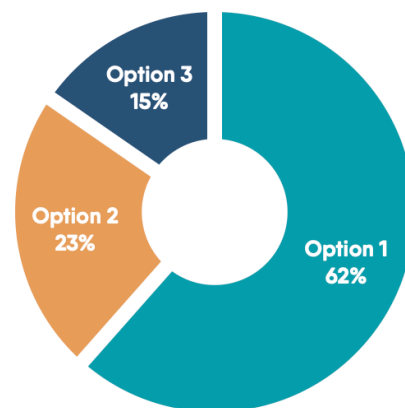


Figure 4: Community Responses to Design Concepts

Figure 4 summarizes the main opinions which have been brought up in this engagement process on the future land use of this property. Table 1 (below) highlights opinions expressed during engagement sessions for and against park space as well as for and against housing. Overall, staff concluded there is a significant amount of interest in establishing at least a portion of this property as a community park, whether that includes a housing development or not.

Table 1: Main Arguments for and Against Design Options

Reasons For 100% Park Space	Reasons Against 100% Park Space	Reasons For Housing Development with Park Space	Reasons For Against Development with Park Space
Supports recreation and outdoor activities	Safety concerns: vandalism, not policed, unleashed dogs, ATVs damaging land and the brook	Opportunity for seniors housing	There are other places in the County for housing
Benefits more than just those who can afford to buy a house	Only a small amount of people use it as a park	Mixed age and mixed income housing opportunity	Housing would be disruptive
The property is great for sledding, walking and exploring		Some areas on the property are not used every day for recreation purposes and could be used for housing	Any park space left on the property would feel like it belongs to the new residents of a housing development
Preserves the natural space		There is a need for housing	The area is safe enough to have a park without housing around
More green spaces is needed in Salmon River		Opportunity for larger tax base in Salmon River	It would take away too much of the green space and trees

Presentations:

In June of 2022, Council directed staff to contact local developers who expressed an interest in the property and see if they wished to make a presentation on local housing supply and demand issues. Josh MacEvoy (Epirus Group) and Jordan Perry (Windrose Equity Inc.) delivered a presentation on affordable housing projects their respective companies have been involved with and spoke at length about the need for affordable housing in the region. They indicated the Salmon River school site would be an ideal setting for a combined housing and open space development given its proximity to community amenities and municipal infrastructure. They also noted challenges in finding larger tracts of land in Central Colchester that may be available for housing projects.

While predating the formal community engagement process, Scott Hagell and Ginny Hingley, residents of Salmon River, made a presentation to Council in December of 2019 advocating for community park that provides a variety of recreational and leisure opportunities such as walking trails, off-leash dog park, community gardens, a green area for activities such as lawn bowling, washer-toss, tai chi, yoga, and ice skating as well as service building that would provide washrooms, fresh water taps for gardening, a meeting room, storage for tools, etc. They feel such a space is needed in Salmon River and this site provides an ideal setting and size for this purpose while fulfilling Colchester's brand and vision for high quality communities.

Documents and Plans to Consider

Policies of Council

Council has approved several policy documents that offer some guidance in terms of how community growth will be managed as well as the provision of services and community parkland. These provide an important backdrop that will help inform discussions as Council deliberates on the future of this land.

Central Colchester Municipal Planning Strategy (MPS - 2002):

The former Salmon River School property falls within the Salmon River Growth Center and was designated and zoned for institutional uses due to the fact that when the MPS came into effect in 2002, the property was used for such purposes. Typically, the practice has been to zone vacant land for low density residential uses. Section 2.2 Municipal Services of the MPS speaks to the infrastructure investments made in each of the Growth Centers and the need to fully utilize these to enable better economies of scale. Policy MS-1 specifically states Council will "Encourage development requiring an extensive range of municipal services to establish in Growth Centers to achieve sustainable and efficient development patterns".

Section 4.4 of the MPS also speaks to residential land uses in Growth Centers and notably, the need to consider housing initiatives that respond to trends and changes in housing markets, particularly as the housing mix needs to accommodate affordable and special needs housing demands. Policies RP-2 and RP-3 signify Council's intentions to "Encourage the continued development of a diverse housing stock that offers a range of residential choices targeting a variety of needs" and "Monitor changes in housing markets and consider amendments to this Strategy that would expand residential development opportunities".

Section 4.8 of the MPS recognizes the value of community recreational amenities and that these respond to the needs of residents. Aside from acquiring new land from subdivision

processes, the MPS refers to the Municipality's Parkland Strategy as the principal document through which future decisions on the provision of parkland will be made.

Municipal Parkland Strategy (2002):

Council adopted its Municipal Parkland Strategy which outlines intentions to service communities with recreational amenities. Policies 2 through 5 indicate a preference to provide neighborhood parks (4.8 acres / 1000 people and within an 800-meter travel distance) at strategic and central locations within communities. Table 2 of the document outlines wherever possible, developing partnerships with schools is best where neighborhood parks can offer a variety of recreational amenities cost effectively. Table 3 of the Strategy suggests that based on existing recreational space in Salmon River (developed and undeveloped), the need for additional space based on population (1996 census data) is small given the fact there is a net surplus of 10 acres of land for this purpose. It should be recognized that the Strategy is now 20 years old and there have been modest changes to both the population and actual recreational spaces since that time.

Service Delivery Strategy (1997):

Council's Service Delivery Strategy rationalizes the provision of all municipal services to residents and businesses within Colchester. While dated, many of the core objectives outlined in the document remain relevant. For reasons expressed in the Central Colchester MPS, Council wishes to intensify development within suburban areas as a means to achieve economies of scale since it has made major infrastructure investments in wastewater collection and treatment, protective services, waste management, active transportation infrastructure, etc. Moreover, Policy SC-3 states Council "...will encourage and promote development in the existing sewer serviced areas of Central Colchester..." implying a desire to infill vacant serviced land in each Growth Center to maximize infrastructure investments. It should be pointed out there will be a corresponding need for recreational amenities as development intensifies within such areas and reference should be made to the Parkland Strategy to help reconcile such emerging demands.

Affordable Housing Needs and Supply Study (2021)

Like much of the province, Colchester is in need of more housing, especially affordable housing. In July 2021 the Affordable Housing Needs and Supply study was completed for the Municipality of Colchester and Town of Truro. This report took a deep drive into the housing needs for this

region. The report focused on 5 different housing types including Shelters & Short-Term Supportive Housing, Deeply Affordable Rental Units, Modestly Affordable Rental Units, Affordable Home Ownership, and Market Rate Housing. The report found that this region does not have enough of all five of these housing types. Regarding deeply affordable rental units, surveys found out the following: “Current waitlists for Housing Nova Scotia facilities suggest at least 752 additional units are required. However, core housing need data suggests that at least 1,005 units would be required to house those who are currently spending more than 50% of their gross income on rent.” It was also found that there is a need for 625 modestly affordable rental units.

One of the recommended solutions offered in this report is providing municipal land for new housing opportunities. This is especially important when working towards development of affordable housing projects, as Non-Profit housing organizations often qualify for grants to fund affordable housing projects, however projects cannot always be completed due to organizations lacking the initial resources to secure the pre-requisite of a project location. Utilizing the part of this property for affordable housing will give the Municipality the opportunity to follow through on one of the recommendations from the housing report.

[Municipality of the County of Colchester Community Energy and Emissions Plan \(2021\)](#)

In 2021, Council approved the Community Energy and Emissions Plan outlining the Municipality’s climate targets for 2050. One of the ways for the municipality to hit this target is through new residential development. This plan aims to ensure the municipality decreases the share of new buildings that are single family homes to 10% by 2030 in development nodes, 85% in remaining nodes. In other words, the municipality needs most new homes to be duplexes, townhouses, or apartments. Utilizing part of the Salmon River property for an affordable housing project can help the Municipality reach this housing target. This lot also allows for the opportunity to explore development guidelines to direct new development into designated compact complete communities and neighborhoods which is another recommendation of the energy plan.

[Cost Considerations:](#)

Throughout the engagement process, many residents expressed a desire to maintain part or all of the site as a municipal park that would possibly include a playground, parking, trails, dog park, preserve the sledding hill, gardens, and some other amenities such as waste receptacles, seating and picnic shelters. Presently, the Municipality carries out minimal maintenance of the

site which consists of mowing, garbage collection and routine inspections at an annual cost of around \$7000.

Recent budgets compiled for the Hearts Haven Memorial Park in Debert (similar size and amenities) suggest the capital cost of developing the entire Salmon River property would be in the vicinity of \$275,000 which would carry an expected annual maintenance cost of more than \$12,000. A scaled back version at 5 – 6 acres which would include a small playground, enclosed dog park (necessary with a playground), parking and trails would likely be in the \$130,000+ range with an annual maintenance cost of \$8000. It should be noted that current municipal park and trail maintenance responsibilities are at capacity and any new responsibilities will require additional staff resources.

It is also important to note Council invests in several recreational assets in Salmon River presently which comprise capital grants totaling nearly \$83,000 in a playground at the Harmony Heights Elementary School, as well as a regular maintenance at an open space on Nancy Avenue and trails and a playground at Birch Park (Princeton Heights / Ice Pond Drive). Other municipally owned undeveloped and unmaintained recreational / open space properties exist on Blaindale Drive, Spruce Drive, Salmon River Road (former Montgomery ball field), Henderson Ridge Road and Wrong Road.

Recommendation

The former Salmon River School property is a community resource that requires careful consideration as Council decides on the highest and best use of this large parcel of land. Community consultations have revealed some competing interests; one group insisting the entire 16-acre parcel be maintained as a community park, while others recognize a mix of residential and parkland is a better option as it has the potential of addressing some housing deficits within the region. The community survey, open houses and presentations provided some insights to specific needs in this regard where it was suggested that affordable / attainable and senior's housing is not widely available in the area. This assertion is validated in the context of the affordable housing study completed in 2021 which quantitatively illustrated the need for more housing choices, especially on the lower end of the housing spectrum. The study also examined the roles of various stakeholders to help fill gaps in housing supply and one key recommendation was that Municipality's own significant amounts of land that can be dedicated for this purpose. Considering the nation-wide housing crisis, the Province of Nova Scotia is currently undertaking a review process that is intended to identify surplus land and making this available for such purposes.

Council's existing policies on growth management clearly indicate a preference for infill development in each of the five Growth Centers; these areas have access to municipal infrastructure, are close to community services and amenities, result in compact development patterns to reduce the costs of urban sprawl, minimize the reliance on vehicles for commuting and enhance the efficiency and cost effectiveness to provide residents the services they have come to expect. Naturally, intensifying development in these areas will be accompanied by a corresponding need to increase the supply of recreational amenities, but most Growth Centers have an ample supply and convenient access to parks, trails, sidewalks, and open space. While dated, the Parkland Strategy provides an in-depth analysis of recreational assets and community needs in this regard and is a reliable benchmark on which Council can make informed choices.

Staff and Council have heard from local developers who expressed an interest in the former Salmon River School property. They are at the forefront of emerging housing market demands in the region and over the last number of years, there has been significant increase in inquiries concerning the availability of land and services, especially larger tracts of land that can be developed more economically. Whether this trend will continue in the future is unknown, but it does validate the proposition that the housing shortage is real and there is a need for Colchester to work with investors, developers, stakeholders, and other levels of government collaboratively to address this issue. Rental vacancy rates are a historic low which places constraints on people who wish to move through the housing continuum. Our affordable housing study author summed it up nicely by concluding, "...when in doubt, do something!" Despite the above, the sentiments of residents who wish for additional recreational space is likewise real and reasonable. These spaces are valued for sentimental reasons and what they can offer to enhance the quality of life for residents. Council is faced with the dilemma of trying to reconcile competing demands for which there is no easy answer. On one hand, they have made major infrastructure investments in this property, and it is a reasonable expectation this could be off set through new tax revenue. On the other hand, Council has a moral obligation to facilitate the continued development of high-quality neighborhoods that are well appointed with recreational amenities. Finding a balance between divergent interests will be challenging since each perspective can be legitimate in its own right.

In consideration of the above, staff believe a compromise solution can be found in dedicating portions of the property for both passive recreational and residential uses since both can co-exist without risks of land use conflict. At 16 acres in total area, a 6-to-8-acre parcel of land for recreational purposes is in keeping with land area criteria outlined in the Municipality's Parkland

Strategy for neighborhood park standards. Moreover, the Parkland Strategy envisages space to centrally serve the population and allowing for some housing development will increase the local need and demand for a neighborhood park. The site is quite isolated and the presence of people in the immediate area should vastly improve any safety issues.

Staff therefore recommend reserving 40 to 50% of the site for trails and passive recreation purposes and issuing a Request for Proposals on the remaining portion for development that should include an affordable / attainable housing component.