

Community Sessions on the Topic of Amalgamation of the Towns of Labrador City and Wabush

REPORT
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Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of public consultation sessions held in the Towns of Labrador City and Wabush in March 2019. The purpose of holding public consultation sessions was primarily to determine if the residents of the area support the Towns proceeding with a plebiscite on the topic of amalgamation. In planning discussions with the steering committee, secondary objectives included seeking feedback on current service delivery, recommendations of what an amalgamated community would look like, a recommended electoral process for Mayor and Council, and level of support for amalgamation or alternatives as outlined in the Stantec report. Two sessions were scheduled; one in Wabush on March 26, 2019 and one in Labrador City on March 27, 2019.

Overall, 155 people registered over two nights. 104 people identified as Labrador City residents; 51 as Wabush residents. Based on 2016 Statistics Canada population figures this represents 1.44% and 2.68% of the communities' population respectively.

Participants were shown a short presentation comparing how services are delivered, population and demographics, and the current election process for each town. The purpose of this presentation was to inform participants on some of the things an amalgamated community, Mayor and Council would have to consider moving forward. Additionally, the recommended election process from the Stantec report was communicated.

Participants were then engaged in a structured dialogue process. They were divided in to teams of four, assigned a question and then proceeded to interview one another and write down responses to the questions. 550 responses were gathered from participants which is far higher than what a traditional stand at the microphone and speak session would generate.

Two polls were conducted (prior to, and after, the presentation and discussion) in each session using electronic polling devices and Turning Technologies software. Participants were asked to self-identify as a resident in Labrador City, Wabush or Neither (if applicable).

Following the presentation and discussion, 32.23% of participants overall support remaining as separate communities, 69.75% of participants overall support continuing and increasing mutually advantageous service agreements, and 51.67% of participants overall support amalgamation.

The Towns of Labrador City and Wabush are seeking feedback from residents to determine if there is enough interest to pursue a plebiscite on the topic of amalgamation of the two communities. While turnout at the public consultation sessions was higher than anticipated, overall attendance represents 1.70% of the region's population (based on 2016 Statistics Canada). When directly asked, 68.60% of participants overall support proceeding with a vote on amalgamation. This varies community to community with 81.58% of Labrador City residents in favour; and 45.24% of Wabush residents in support of a vote.

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of public consultation sessions held in the Towns of Labrador City and Wabush in March 2019. The Towns are seeking feedback from residents to determine if there is enough interest to pursue a plebiscite on the topic of amalgamation of the two communities. It is important for residents of both communities to understand the impact of amalgamation prior to the holding of a plebiscite.

Background

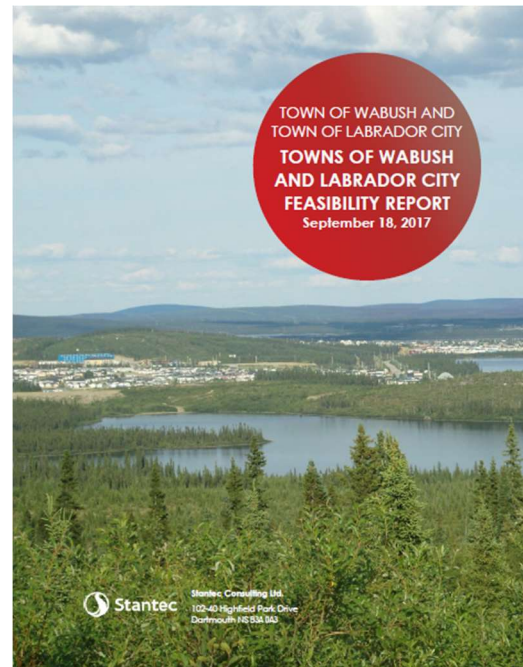
In late 2016, the communities of Labrador City and Wabush agreed to conduct a feasibility study to pursue if amalgamation of the two towns is recommended. In June 2017, Stantec Consulting Ltd. was engaged to study and prepare a feasibility report. In September 2017, the Stantec report was released to the communities. The Stantec report concluded that amalgamation is feasible and therefore recommended that the Towns of Labrador City and Wabush amalgamate to become the Town of Labrador West.

In December 2018, the Towns of Labrador City and Wabush issued a request for proposal (RFP) for a facilitator to lead and mediate public information sessions with the residents of Labrador City and Wabush to present pertinent information contained in the Feasibility Report as part of the next steps in the amalgamation study process.

In January 2019, the Towns of Labrador City and Wabush contracted Carole R. Spicer, owner and founder, of Spicer Facilitation & Learning in response to the RFP. The steering committee, comprised of the Mayor, Deputy Mayor, Town Manager and Town Clerk of both communities, worked closely with Mrs. Spicer to design and support the public consultation sessions.

Purpose of Public Consultation Sessions

The purpose of holding public consultation sessions was primarily to determine if the residents of the area support the Towns proceeding with a plebiscite on the topic of amalgamation. In planning discussions with the steering committee, secondary objectives included seeking feedback on current service delivery, recommendations of what an amalgamated community would look like, a recommended electoral process for Mayor and Council, and level of support for amalgamation or alternatives as outlined in the Stantec report. Two sessions were scheduled; one in Wabush on March 26, 2019 and one in Labrador City on March 27, 2019. The sessions were scheduled on a Tuesday and Wednesday evening to accommodate the many shift workers in the region with their on/off turnaround. Participation was not restricted to either community.



Registration

No formal registration process was used prior to the public consultation sessions. Participants were asked to sign in and indicate their community of residence upon arrival.

Overall, 155 people registered over two nights. 104 people identified as Labrador City residents; 51 as Wabush residents. Based on 2016 Statistics Canada population figures this represents 1.44% and 2.68% of the communities' population respectively.

Methodology

During several planning discussions, it became evident that the topic of amalgamation is a sensitive and emotional topic for many, including residents, town staff and elected officials. As such, it was determined that the process used needed to be as neutral, non-leading, and as non-judgemental as possible. The process needed to ensure that residents with very strong opposing opinions would feel comfortable expressing those opinions in a public setting. There was uncertainty to how many people would attend each session and therefore the process had to be flexible to accommodate varying numbers as needed.

Session Design

The session agenda (outlined below) was developed with the steering committee's objectives in mind. Participants were provided background information to the public consultation sessions and then asked to complete a pulse poll to get a sense of what residents were feeling about amalgamation. A community profile presentation was shared outlining similarities and differences in service delivery in the two communities. Following the presentation, a discussion among participants, in groups of four, was held following a structured, facilitated process. A report back to the room at large captured the essence of the small group discussions. Participants were then asked to make an informed decision and respond to the same pulse poll questions from earlier in the evening.

Welcome and Introductions

Elected officials were not permitted to actively participate in the polling and discussions. This ensured the integrity of the data collected was maintained.

The Mayors, Deputy Mayors, members of each community's Town

Council and the Member of the House of Assembly (MHA) for Labrador West were in attendance for both public sessions and were acknowledged at the opening of the event. They remained neutral and observed the proceedings.



Photo 1; Elected Officials; Wabush Session March 26, 2019

Purpose and Background

Participants were advised that the Towns are seeking to gauge the level of interest of residents to proceed with a plebiscite on the topic of amalgamation. The steps leading to the public consultation as outlined above were shared with attendees. It was shared that Stantec reviewed three scenarios and their report recommended amalgamation. Participants were also advised that this session could not answer what the newly amalgamated community's service delivery, tax rates, infrastructure etc. would be in the future as these decisions would be made by a new Mayor and Town Council.

Pulse Poll

Prior to any information sharing, or discussion, a pulse poll was conducted to gauge the "sense of the room". Live polling results were displayed for everyone to see once the poll was closed. This allowed for full transparency and for attendees to see that there were differing opinions in the room.

Community Profiles

Following the pulse poll, participants were shown a short presentation comparing how services are delivered, population and demographics, and the current election process for each town.



Photo 2: Presentation; Wabush Session March 26, 2019

The purpose of this presentation was to inform participants on some of the things an amalgamated community, Mayor and Council would have to consider moving forward. Additionally, the recommended election process from the Stantec report was communicated. This presentation also addressed the concerns expressed by the steering committee that there is a lot of misinformation being shared among residents in the region.

Discussion

Participants were then engaged in a structured dialogue process. They were divided in to teams of four, assigned a question and then proceeded to interview one another and write down responses to the questions. Following the interview process, responses to each question were combined and summarized on flip chart for reporting back to the large group. Themes were identified.



Photo 3: Summary discussion; Wabush Session March 26, 2019

Next Steps

Following the community profile presentation, group discussion, and report back to the large group, participants were re-pollled on the same questions asked earlier in the evening. Poll results were again displayed along with the change from poll #1 and poll #2. Participants were advised that a report will be sent to the Towns of Labrador City and Wabush for review by their respective Mayor, Council and steering committee members.

Discussion Questions Results

The discussion portion of the session was designed to minimize the possibility of a few participants dominating the discussion and to enhance participant engagement. Each participant had an opportunity to answer all four questions and responses were captured in writing. 550 responses were gathered from participants which is far higher than what a traditional stand at the microphone and speak session would generate.

Current Service Delivery

143 participants responded to the question, “How do you feel about your current service delivery from your community?” This addressed the steering committee’s expressed desire to know what residents think of the current state.

Responses were assigned a rating on a 5-point scale ranging from Very Good to Very Poor.

Rating	# of Responses
Very Good	54
Good, with room for improvement	57
Neutral	9
Poor, not up to standard	12
Very Poor	11

76.22% of participants rated their current service delivery as Very Good or Good. Suggestions include improvements to snow clearing, walking trails, upkeep and maintenance of current infrastructure and improving recycling options. Other comments focused on lack of resources available to town staff, the need for better equipment and the desire to see improved cost efficiencies. Both youth and seniors were referenced as needing improvements in programs and services. It was mentioned that using in-house resources is preferred over contracting out. The uniqueness of the region with regards to air travel for medical, personal and work was cited as an area of concern with lack of choice and high associated costs.

Amalgamated Community

138 participants responded to the question, “What do you think an amalgamated community should look like?” This was in response to the steering committee wanting to know what residents envision an amalgamated community to be.

Themes of services, finances, unity and equality emerged when the responses were analyzed.

Theme	# of Mentions
Services	76
Finances	42
Unity	57
Equality	28

52.17% of responses indicated an expectation that services would be shared across both communities with improvements and introduction of new programs and services. 18.84% of

responses recommend elimination of redundancies in buildings, programs and staff, and an overall reduction in cost of service delivery.

Almost a quarter of the participants, 23.91%, expressed a desire for unity, working together and “looking out for one another” while others expressed a desire for no more of a Us/Them mindset. A further 18.12% responded that all residents should be treated equally and fairly. 13 participants indicated representation should also be equal and fair.

It should look united. Stop looking at 1960 & focus on 2045.

Participant comment from Public Consultation session

6.52% of participants responded that an amalgamated community should look prosperous and be accessible for all. Six participants feel that amalgamation would provide a united voice for the larger community to advocate for funding with Provincial and Federal governments and industry. Three people suggested the name Carol Lake for an amalgamated community while 3 others felt the identities would remain the same even if amalgamation occurs.

10.14% of participants indicated they are against amalgamation; therefore, they declined to offer any suggestions on what an amalgamated community should look like.

Electoral Process

141 participants responded to the question, “What process would you recommend be used to elect a new Mayor and Council of an amalgamated community?” This was in response to the electoral process recommendation from the Stantec Report. The steering committee was interested in whether residents concur with that recommendation.

24.11% of participants agree with the electoral process recommended in the Stantec report.

Almost a quarter of participants, 24.11%, agree with the ward system proposed in the Stantec report for electing a new Council. Of note, an additional 20.57% agree with a ward system, with different allotments per ward. Suggestions include: 1 each community & balance at-large, 2 each community & balance at-large, 3 each community, 3 Wabush & 4 Labrador City, and 3 Wards including Wabush, Labrador City and Harrie Lake (Trailer Court). The size of Council was mentioned several times with the number of members ranging from 6 to 9.

Other suggestions for a ward system include being based on population (6.38%) and being equal, not based on population (8.51%). Additionally, it was suggested that a ward system be used for several years (4 or 10) and then dropped as the amalgamated community comes together. Many participants, 60.99%, want to see a separate election for Mayor, regardless of whether they support a ward system. Several suggestions were put forward for Deputy Mayor including the highest number of votes among Councillors, Council to appoint, and that the Deputy Mayor should be from the opposite community than that the Mayor is from.

9 participants expressed they are not in favour of amalgamation.

Options

128 participants responded to the question, “Which of the three options (Stay Same, Service Agreements or Amalgamate) do you support? Why?” This was in response to the options reviewed in the Stantec Report that led to the recommendation of amalgamation. The steering committee was interested in whether residents concur with that recommendation.

Responses were tallied and the reasons why each option supported combined.

Option	# of Responses
Stay Same	18
Service Agreements	33
Amalgamate	78
Undecided	8

Stay Same

14.06% of participants support staying the same as separate communities.

Generally, there is a feeling that things are working well now, and these participants are happy with the way things are currently. There is an expectation for the two communities to cooperate more. Concern was also expressed about losses to Wabush and the inability to reverse the amalgamation decision if things weren't working.

Because over the years we have worked together when needed.

Participant comment in support of remaining separate communities from Public Consultation

Service Agreements

A quarter of participants, 25.78%, support the use of service agreements.

There is an expectation that service agreements would produce cost savings as costs would be shared between the communities. It was noted that the landfill agreement is working well and there is speculation on whether the same type of agreement could work for recreation?

Improve the agreements to be more beneficial, there should be no need for amalgamation if both towns can think on the same level to work together, rather than take a voice potentially from one community

Participant comment in support of using service agreements from Public Consultation session

It was observed by participants that the three options outlined above are not mutually exclusive. For example, the communities could remain separate and increase the use of mutually advantageous service agreements.

Some felt service agreements are a way to move toward cooperation and eliminate the need to amalgamate. Generally, participants supporting this option viewed it as less risky than amalgamation.

Amalgamate

Amalgamation is supported by 60.94% of participants in attendance.

These participants expect that amalgamation will result in improved services, cost savings, and increased funding from Federal and Provincial governments as they are united to advocate for the region. There is an expressed desire to share professional services and utilize the skills of current employees more efficiently.

They are not in favour of job losses in either community or tax increases.

There is a sense in respondents that it is a step towards unity and a way to improve service in the region. Many simply responded, "It makes sense."

Because the time has come to put differences aside and get our towns to enjoy the benefit of services that need attention so that we can all grow and prosper.

Participant comment in support of amalgamation
from Public Consultation session

Undecided

6.25% of participants are unsure, undecided or indifferent about the topic of amalgamation.

Many cited they don't feel they have enough information to decide at this time. While uncertain about amalgamation, generally there is an expectation that the communities will work together and make joint decisions.

I am indifferent towards what happens. As long as everything that concerns the safety of the people within the community keeps people safe - that is all that matters.

Participant comment from Public Consultation session

Polling Results

Two polls were conducted in each session using electronic polling devices and Turning Technologies software. Participants were asked to self-identify as a resident in Labrador City, Wabush or Neither (if applicable). When the data were analyzed it was discovered that some participants did not respond to this question. It is impossible to determine if this was done deliberately or unintentionally.

Poll Engagement

Table 1.1 outlines the level of engagement during the polling activity. The level of participation dropped during the second poll due to participants leaving the session early. Participants identified during registration that they could not remain for the entire scheduled session; however, they were encouraged to attend as their schedule permitted.

Questions were polled twice as outlined above; therefore, the questions are as follows:

1. I support continuing on as separate communities
2. I support continuing and increasing mutually advantageous service agreements
3. I support amalgamation
4. I am a resident of...
5. I support my community proceeding with a vote on amalgamation
6. I support continuing on as separate communities
7. I support continuing and increasing mutually advantageous service agreements
8. I support amalgamation
9. I am a resident of...
10. I support my community proceeding with a vote on amalgamation

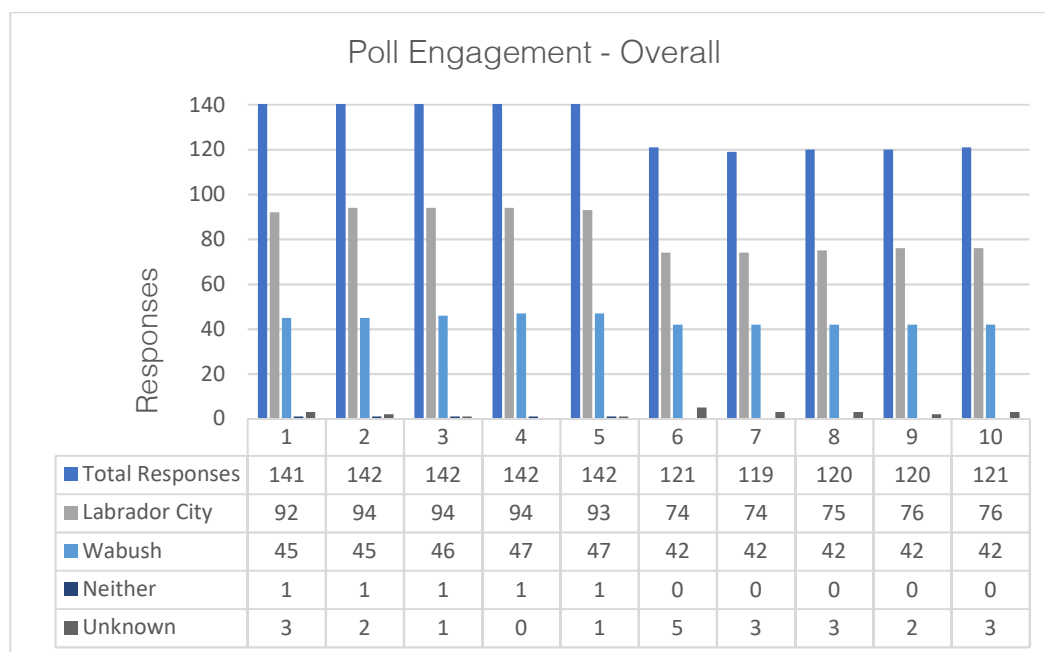


Table 1.1

Separate Communities

Tables 2.1 and 2.2 represent responses to the option of remaining as separate communities.

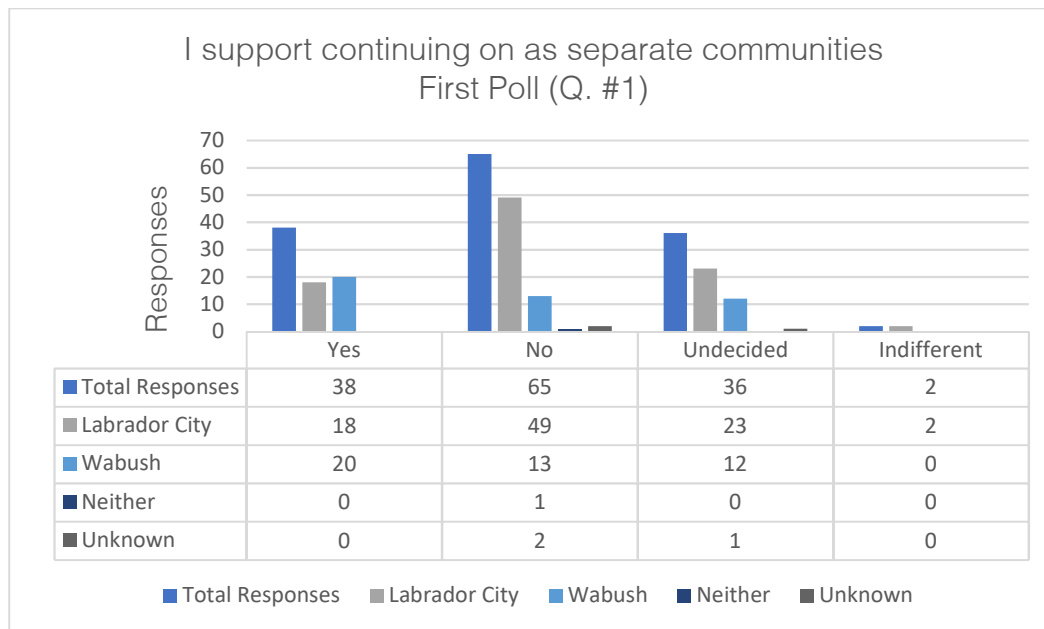


Table 2.1

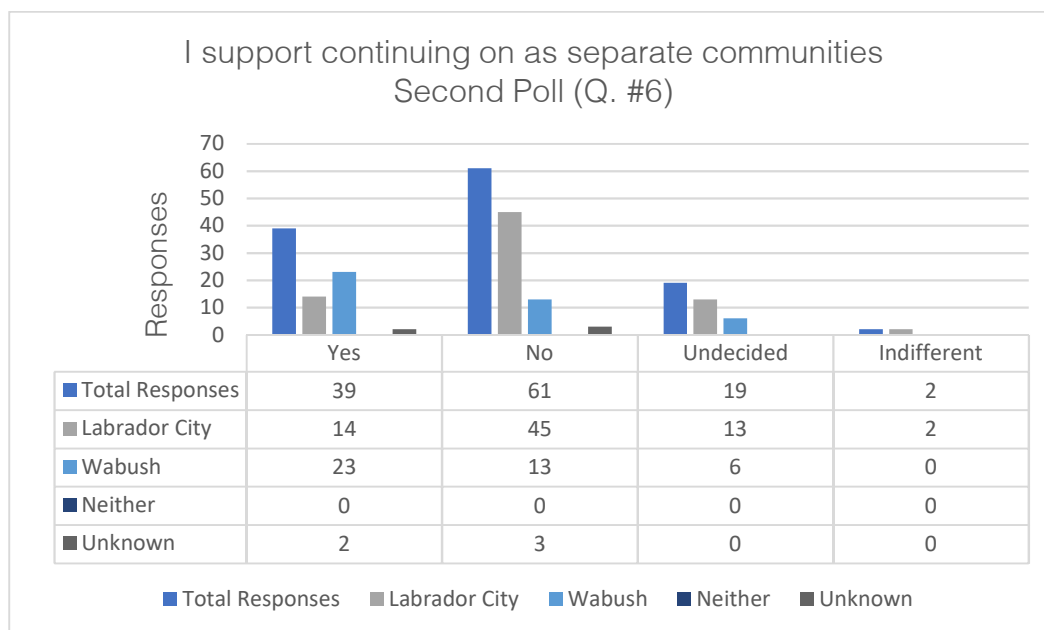


Table 2.2

Following the presentation and discussion, 32.23% of participants overall support remaining as separate communities. This is comprised of 18.92% of Labrador City residents in favour; and 54.76% of Wabush residents in support of remaining as separate communities.

Service Agreements

Tables 3.1 and 3.2 represent responses to the option of continuing and increasing mutually advantageous service agreements.

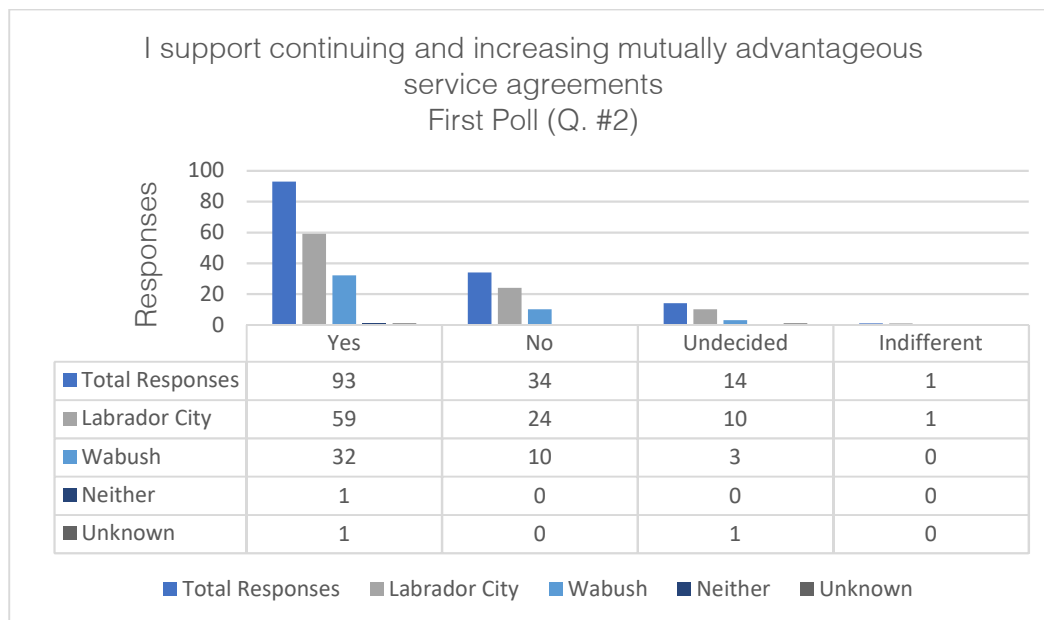


Table 3.1

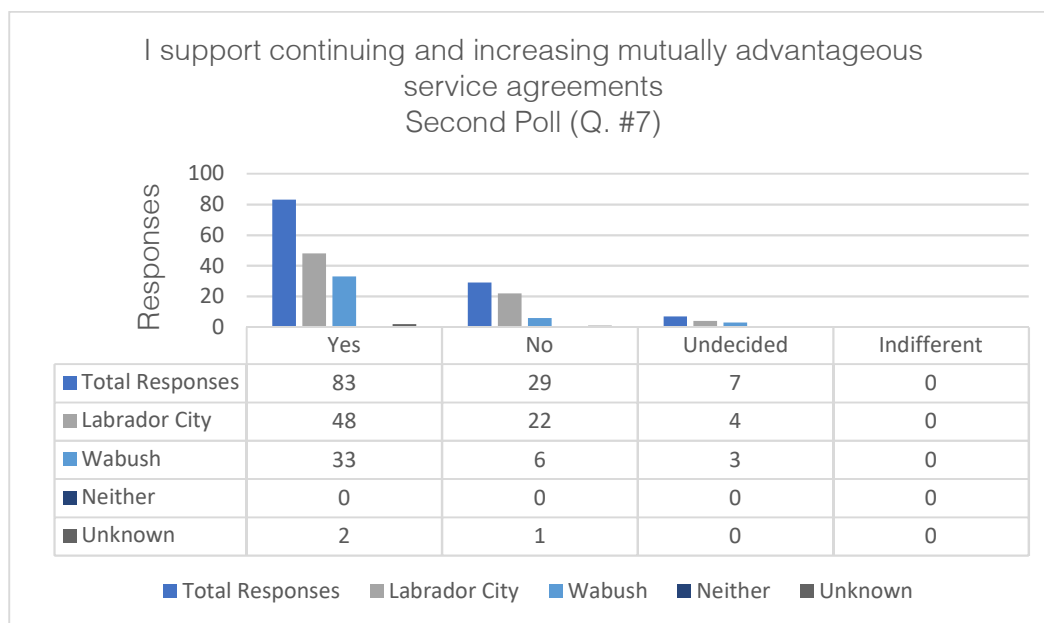


Table 3.2

Following the presentation and discussion, 69.75% of participants overall support continuing and increasing mutually advantageous service agreements. This is comprised of 64.86% of Labrador City residents in favour; and 78.57% of Wabush residents in support of continuing and increasing mutually advantageous service agreements.

Amalgamation

Tables 4.1 and 4.2 represent responses to the option of amalgamation.

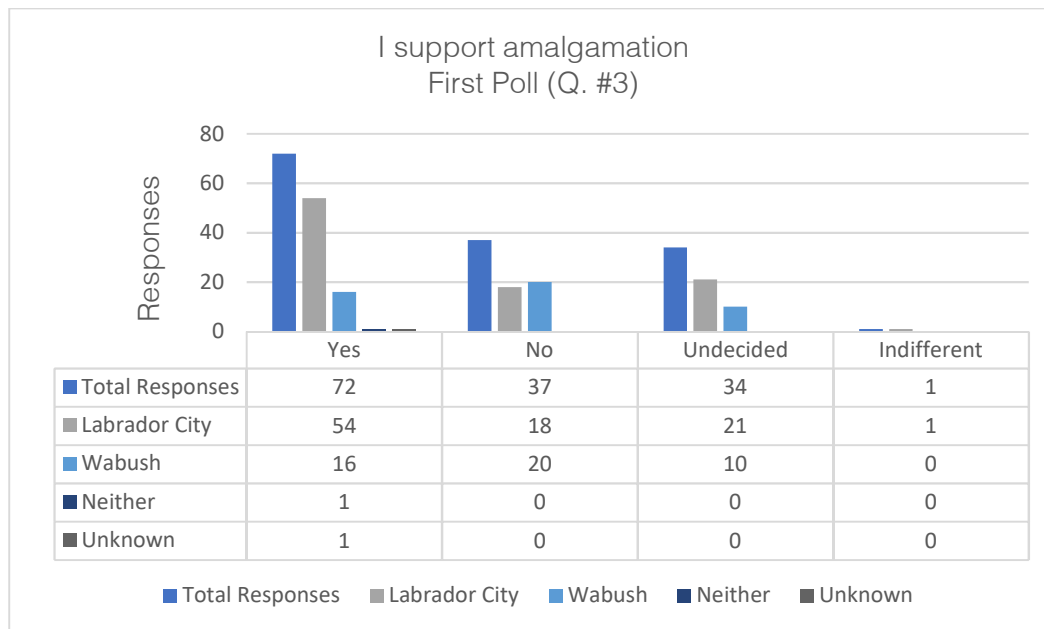


Table 4.1

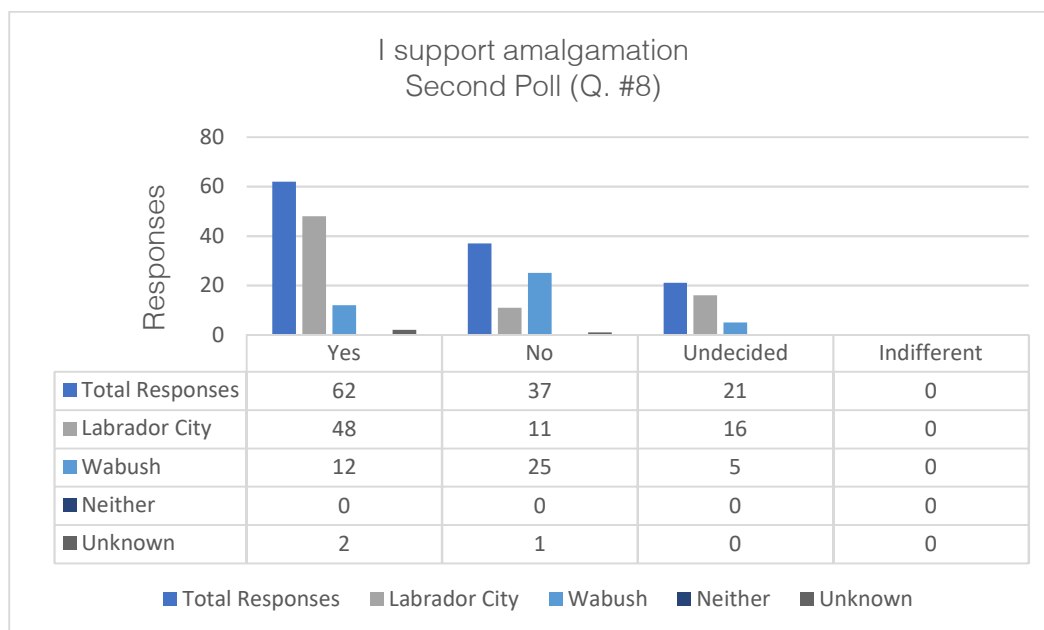


Table 4.2

Following the presentation and discussion, 51.67% of participants overall support amalgamation. This is comprised of 64.00% of Labrador City residents in favour; and 28.57% of Wabush residents in support of amalgamation.

Plebiscite

Tables 5.1 and 5.2 represent responses to the question of proceeding with a vote on amalgamation.

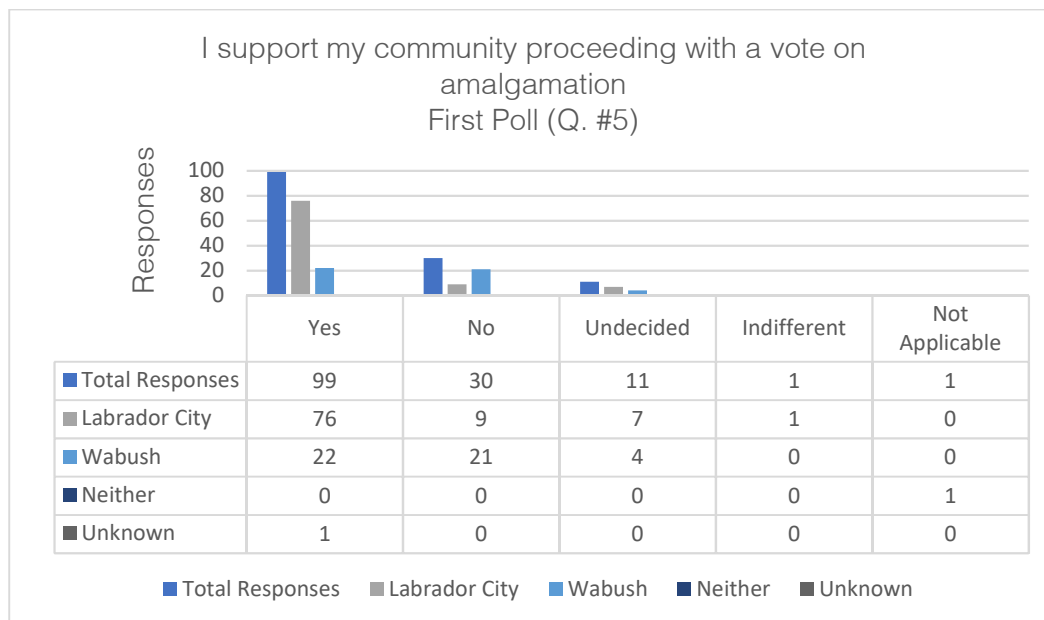


Table 5.1

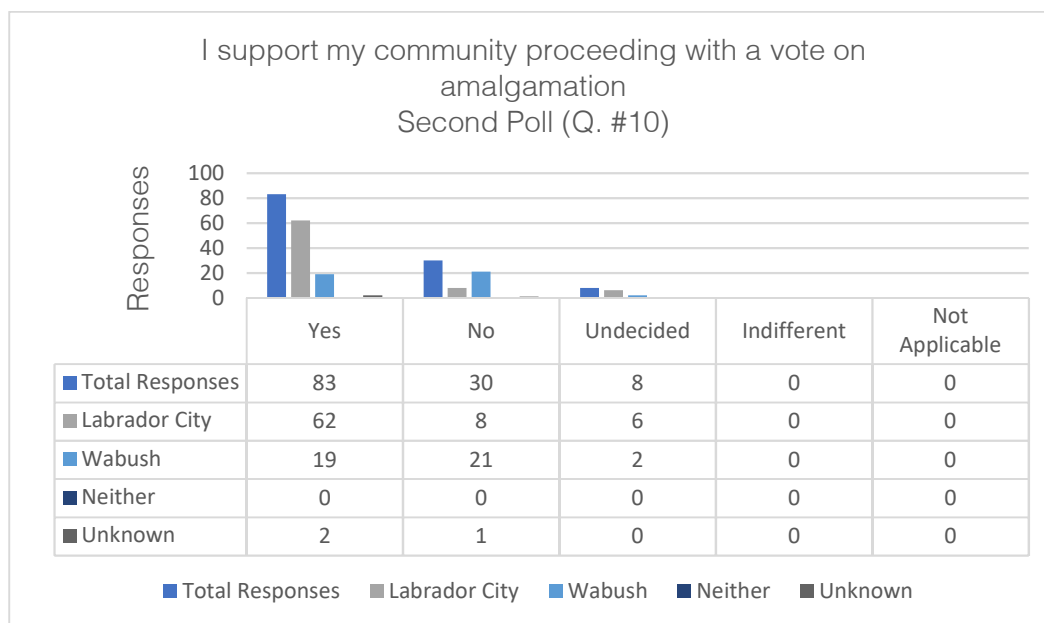


Table 5.2

Following the presentation and discussion, 68.60% of participants overall support proceeding with a vote on amalgamation. This is comprised of 81.58% of Labrador City residents in favour; and 45.24% of Wabush residents in support of a vote.

Summary

The Towns of Labrador City and Wabush are seeking feedback from residents to determine if there is enough interest to pursue a plebiscite on the topic of amalgamation of the two communities. While turnout at the public consultation sessions was higher than anticipated, overall attendance represents 1.70% of the region's population (based on 2016 Statistics Canada). When directly asked, 68.60% of participants overall support proceeding with a vote on amalgamation. This varies community to community with 81.58% of Labrador City residents in favour; and 45.24% of Wabush residents in support of a vote.

The discussion questions show that residents are generally pleased with their current service delivery from the Towns. There are suggestions for areas of improvement for consideration by both communities.

If amalgamation were to occur, there is a high expectation that services will be shared, improved and/or upgraded under the new entity. There is also an expressed desire for a sense of unity between the former communities. A desire to advocate for the region as a larger population was also expressed.

Most participants are in favour of a ward system for an election of one Council and Mayor for an amalgamated community; however, the number of wards and the allocation within are varied. There is generally an approval for a separate election for Mayor with several suggestions for the election of a Deputy Mayor.

Of the three options reviewed by Stantec in their report, 60.94% of participants overall identified that amalgamation is their preferred option during the discussions; however, during polling following the presentation and discussion, only 51.67% of participants support amalgamation.