



Subject: *Lawrence House Museum Operating Models*
To: Parks, Recreation & Culture Committee
Date Prepared: August 12, 2026
Related Motions: C26(122)
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Summary

In April 2026, Council passed Motion C26(122) requesting a preliminary report on taking over the Lawrence House Museum. The request specified the report should review municipal ownership, and options for both municipal operations and community group operations. The motion further clarified that staff should prepare the report with the assumption that required upgrades to the building (to municipal expectations) are done by the Province prior to any transfer of ownership.

Financial Impact Statement

There are no direct financial impacts as a result of recommended motion.

Recommendation

Staff recommend the Municipality not seek ownership of the Lawrence House Museum property.

Recommended Motion

Move that the Parks, Recreation and Culture Committee recommends to Council that the Municipality not seek ownership or operations of the Lawrence House Museum.

Background

The Lawrence House Museum, located in the Heritage Conservation District Village of Maitland, opened in the 1970s as a part of the Nova Scotia Museum system after being donated by the Lawrence family. William D. Lawrence (1817-1886), a notable shipbuilder and politician originally from Ireland, built the large two and a half story home around 1870. William D. Lawrence built the largest wooden ship ever to be constructed in Canada at a shipyard adjacent to his property on the shore of the Shubenacadie River. The museum itself features a collection of original furniture, belongings and art from the Lawrence family and reflects the area's history as a hub for commerce and shipbuilding in the 1800s. Over the years, the museum also hosted events including the Launch Days Festival which marks the launch of the W.D. Lawrence ship with various community activities including a procession of residents dressed in period costume and the launch of a miniature replica ship.

The museum has faced interruptions in service and limited attendance over the past several years, including a temporary seasonal closure which was announced in June of 2024. In fall of 2024, the Province met with community members and the Municipality about moving to a community support model for the Lawrence House Museum with the goal of making operations more sustainable. In 2025, the Museum opened for the season with staff, although it was only open 3-5 days a week. A non-profit organization called Friends of Lawrence House (FoLH) was formed early in 2026 by interested members of the community to support operations and expand programming at the site. Friends of Lawrence House hosted some community events such as live music at the museum property in the 2025 season.

Closure of the museum was announced as part of provincial budget cuts earlier this year and the museum didn't open for 2026. The Province cited low visitation and costs as main factors in the decision.

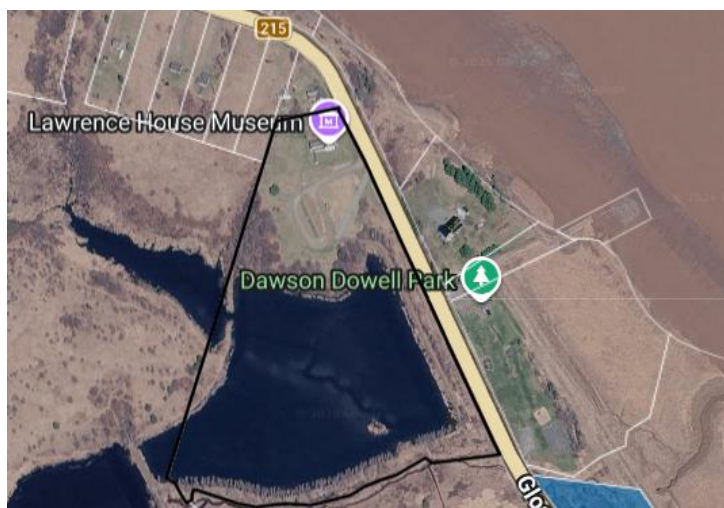
Discussion

Staff have collected information below to assist Council in understanding the nature and condition of the property, as well as past museum operations.

Council motion leading to this report indicated that the Province would be expected to complete any capital work on the property before a community or Municipal operation model would take shape. In conversation with the Province, East Hants staff have confirmed that Nova Scotia Public Works is working on an assessment of the Lawrence House building and will bring any recommended repairs or upgrades to the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism & Heritage (CCTH) for review and decision.

At-a-glance details about the museum property:

- Located at 8660 Highway 215 in Maitland
- Approximately 10 acres in size and includes a section of wetland area associated with Ducks Unlimited
- The house was constructed circa 1870
- Property also includes a small outbuilding/shed, age and condition unknown
- Collection includes an unknown number of artifacts including furniture, belongings, art, clothing
- Designated as a Provincial Heritage Property under the Heritage Property Act



Currently, the municipality does not operate a museum property, however the East Hants Museum Society operates the municipally-owned Shubenacadie Tinsmith Shop Museum. An ongoing governance review has been taking place since July 2025 with the EHMS to improve long-term operations of this site.

Staff are aware that there are two community groups, Maitland District Development Association (MDDA) and Friends of Lawrence House, who have separately expressed interest in some form of Lawrence House Museum operations and do not appear to be collaborating.

Community Interest

Friends of Lawrence House

Created to support the provincial operations in the summer of 2025. This group worked under the East Hants Historical Society for most of the season as their societal registration was delayed. Since the closure

announcement in early 2026, there have been no events at the site. The group remains an entity with an unknown number of board members or volunteers that also volunteer with other local groups. Staff confirmed that the FoLH have spoken to the Province about next steps and potential community ownership.

Maitland & District Development Association

Currently this group owns and operates Gallery 215 in the Municipal Heritage building Selma Schoolhouse and also hold a lease for Beyond the Wharf Artisans at Dawson Dowell Park. The current board has expressed interest in the Lawrence House Museum and municipal staff have been working with the group to improve governance and internal relations within the group.

East Hants Historical Society

EHHS operates the Lower Selma Museum, and archive site on Parks Roads. They have confirmed their group is not interested in a second museum property.

Economic, Tourism, & Community Impact

From information provided by provincial staff, the average visitation of the Lawrence House Museum over the past several years totals approximately 1000 visitors per season. There were higher visitation numbers prior to the pandemic, however visitation to most museum properties province-wide has not been trending upward on average in recent years. The museum employs 3-5 people for 4 to 6 months.

The East Hants Tourism Strategy, while currently under review, does not identify museums as a priority for Municipal tourism effort and in public consultation throughout 2026, museums were not identified as a priority by a majority residents.

There is little data to support significant economic spinoff from Lawrence House. Although having more places to stop along Hwy 215 is good for keeping people in East Hants, our own municipal sites have seen growth in revenue and visitation over the past few years even through Lawrence House has been closed or open part-time. Beyond the Wharf/Dawson Dowell Park, the closest neighbouring site, has also seen steady if not increasing visitation. Operation of the Lawrence House Museum would be to support the historical, heritage, and community value of the property, and staff would not advise Council to make the decision based on potential economic spinoff. In regard to budgeting estimates, the site would expect to operate at a loss. Other similar tourism/heritage sites operate in the same fashion, but there are significantly more opportunities for grant funding and cost-recovery at the existing municipally-owned sites compared to a museum property.

Jurisdictional Scan

While there is an inherent value to preserving the heritage and historical assets within East Hants, there is not a current municipal mandate which allocates staff time or budget to museum operations. The municipality does support non-profit organizations in the operation of a number of historical properties, including:

- Shubenacadie Tinsmith Shop Museum (municipally owned, non-profit operated via grant funding)
 - o Typical attendance: ~400 visitors
 - o Season length: July-August
 - o Staff: 2-4 full time students
- Walton Lighthouse (municipally owned, non-profit operated via grant funding)
 - o Typical attendance: 10,000-12,000 visitors
 - o Season length: May-October
 - o Staff: 1 full time student, casual shoulder season staff
- Gallery 215 located in the Selma Schoolhouse heritage property (non-profit owned and operated, Tourism Grant funding from MEH)
 - o Typical attendance: 800-1,200 visitors
 - o Season length: June-late fall (staying open until Nov-Dec this year)
 - o Staff: 1 full time student

- Lower Selma Museum (non-profit owned and operated, Tourism Grant and Community Partnership funding from MEH)
 - o Typical attendance: 400-500 visitors
 - o Season length: June-September
 - o Staff: 2 full time students, casual shoulder season staff
- Uniacke Estate Museum (Provincially owned/operated, one of the top 4 sites in NS for visitation within NS Museum system)
 - o Typical attendance: Museum: ~2,000-3,000 | Trails/grounds: ~20,000
 - o Season length: June-October
 - o Staff: 2-4 full time staff, 4-6 seasonal guides and groundskeeping staff

For reference, the Municipally-owned and operated tourism sites such as the Fundy Tidal Interpretive Centre and Burntcoat Head Park run from May-October annually. FTIC has an average visitation of 14,000-17,000 visitors, and Burntcoat Head Park has an average visitation of 60,000-80,000 visitors. The municipally-owned sites have a combined team of 7-10 seasonal staff who are sometimes cross trained to work at both locations.

Options

Outlined below is an analysis of the three options regarding municipal ownership of the Lawrence House Museum and property.

1. No further municipal action

- This option recommends that Municipality of East Hants does not pursue ownership or operation of the Lawrence House Museum.
- Community groups would work directly with the Province, without Municipal involvement, a process that has already begun.

Benefit

- No financial or operational impact to the Municipality.
- Potential for Province to move ahead with working directly with a community group if feasible.

Risk

- Potential loss of community asset and its historical value.
- Community group takes on building without the upgrades done, leaving the municipality as the next level of government the group will look to for funding.

Financial Consideration

- No impact at this time.
- If a community group does take it on, they would likely be applicants to Municipal grant programs such as NFP Insurance Grant, Tourism Grant, Community Grant and Bylaw F400.

2. Work with the Province to assume Municipal ownership of property and lease to community group to operate

- This option only works if Province does capital upgrades first, with significant grant funding and volunteer support needed.
- A lease/operation agreement would be established to outline responsibilities of community group and municipality.

Benefit

- Provides Municipal ownership and oversight of the property while allowing a community organization to operate the museum.
- Maintains community involvement and volunteer capacity in the operation and programming of the museum.

Risk

- Continued reliance on volunteers to operate and manage the museum.

- Limited funding for this sector from the Province, putting more pressure on the Municipality for continued capital and maintenance costs.

Financial Consideration

- Capital costs and some annual maintenance would be Municipality's responsibility. Based on comparable properties, staff expect MEH would incur approximately \$10,000-\$20,000 annually for building/property expenses and insurance.
- Increased budget/expense in the Tourism cost centre to support annual staffing, insurance and operational grants (in alignment with other MEH-owned, non-profit operated attractions such as Walton Lighthouse/Tinsmith Shop Museum).

3. Work with Province to assume ownership and move to Municipal operations

- This option could only be considered if Province does capital upgrades first.

Benefit

- Provides the Municipality with direct control over the long-term operation and preservation of the Lawrence House Museum and collection.
- Reduces reliance on volunteer capacity and provides greater continuity in staffing, maintenance, programming and public access.
- Maintains the museum as a publicly accessible community heritage and tourism asset.

Risk

- The Municipality does not currently have the technical or operational capacity to assume operations of a museum site (no on-staff archival or museum collections management ability). Additional specialized staff or contracted expertise would be required to properly manage and preserve the collection.
- Opportunities for external operating funding are expected to be limited due to recent reductions in Provincial museum funding, although staff would continue to pursue available grants, such as Federal student employment funding.

Financial Consideration

- 3-4 staff - \$80,000 for the season (mid-May to mid-October)
- Capital costs and some annual maintenance would be Municipality's responsibility. Based on comparable properties, staff expect MEH would incur approximately \$20,000-\$30,000 annually for building and property operating expenses and insurance. These are high level estimates at this time.

STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

Strong Community

The Lawrence House Museum is a community heritage asset that contributes to local identity, sense of place and community pride.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

As outlined in the options above, the financial impact to the Municipality will depend on the ownership and operating model selected. Municipal ownership would result in additional capital, maintenance, insurance and operating costs, with municipal operation also requiring seasonal staffing and potentially specialized museum and archival expertise.

The Province would need to complete significant capital upgrades prior to any transfer of ownership and opportunities for ongoing external operating funding are expected to be limited. Any future Municipal financial commitment would need to be considered through the annual budget process and weighed against other Municipal priorities.

Attachments

Letter from Province regarding the museum closure.