Pictou County Coastal Policy Frequently Asked Questions

Pictou County is beginning a public conversation about how the Municipality can plan for coastal change. No preferred policy has been selected. This document answers common questions and explains how residents can take part.

No new coastal policy is being adopted through this engagement project.

About the Project

1. What is this project about?

The Municipality is exploring how future planning decisions could respond to coastal flooding, erosion and other changing coastal conditions. The project will share information, gather community knowledge and identify matters that may need further consideration. It will not adopt a new coastal policy during this engagement project.

2. Why is the Municipality discussing coastal planning now?

Nova Scotia's coast is continually changing, and climate change is affecting the conditions under which flooding, erosion, storms and drainage problems occur. Planning before impacts become more serious can help the Municipality make informed decisions about future development, roads, drainage, public infrastructure and municipal land.

3. Has the Municipality already decided what a future policy will say?

No. The Municipality has not selected a preferred planning approach. The purpose of engagement is to learn what residents value, where they have observed changes or problems, and what concerns should be considered before any future policy work is undertaken.

4. Are coastal planning rules already in place?

Yes. Pictou County's Municipal Planning Strategy and Land Use By-law already include rules that guide some development near mapped marine shorelines. These include a coastal development buffer and a process that may allow a reduced buffer when specified information and professional assessment are provided.

The current rules provide a starting point for the conversation. This project is asking whether the Municipality's existing approach should stay the same or change as coastal conditions evolve and new information becomes available.

Understanding Coastal Change

5. What coastal issues are being considered?

The discussion includes sea-level rise, storm surge, coastal flooding, erosion, changing storm conditions, heavy rainfall, river and drainage impacts, and changes to beaches, dunes, wetlands and other natural features. These processes can interact and should not always be considered separately.

6. Why does coastal change matter in Pictou County?

Pictou County's coastal communities, roads, wharves, working waterfronts, beaches, wetlands and estuaries are influenced by tides, waves, storms, sediment movement, river water, runoff, drainage and seasonal ice.

The effects will differ from place to place depending on elevation, shoreline type, exposure, natural features and existing development.

7. What is compound flooding?

Compound flooding occurs when more than one source of water contributes to flooding at the same time. For example, heavy rain and runoff may occur when coastal water is already high. High coastal water can make it harder for rivers and drainage systems to release water, increasing flooding in low-lying areas.

8. Does sea-level rise mean the shoreline will move inland evenly everywhere?

No. Higher sea levels raise the starting point for tides, storm surge and waves, but shoreline change will not be uniform. Local effects depend on elevation, slope, geology, sediment, wave exposure, natural coastal features and infrastructure.

Climate projections help explain the overall direction of change, but they do not predict exactly what will happen to an individual property.

Municipal Planning Options

9. What role does the Municipality have?

Municipal decisions about land use, development, roads, drainage, public infrastructure and municipal property can influence how communities prepare for coastal flooding and erosion.

The Municipality can consider planning rules, public information and investment decisions within its authority. It cannot prevent every flood, stop all erosion or control natural coastal processes.

10. What planning approaches could be considered?

Five broad approaches may be considered. More than one approach may be used, and approaches may change over time as conditions and information change.

Protect: Use engineered or natural measures to reduce impacts on important buildings, infrastructure or community assets.

Accommodate: Design buildings, infrastructure or public spaces to better withstand, recover from or continue functioning during coastal events.

Work with nature: Maintain or restore buffers, wetlands, dunes, beaches and vegetation that support natural coastal processes.

Avoid new risk: Direct new development away from locations where coastal hazards may create unacceptable risks.

Plan for future change: Consider how buildings, infrastructure or community assets could be adapted, relocated or used differently if they cannot be safely or reasonably maintained over the long term.

11. What planning tools could support these approaches?

Possible tools include coastal setbacks, natural buffers, minimum building elevations, flood-resilient design, site-specific assessments, different requirements for different areas and better coastal-hazard information. No preferred tool has been selected.

12. Will the same approach be suitable everywhere?

Not necessarily. Different parts of Pictou County have different shoreline types, elevations, exposure, drainage conditions, natural features and patterns of development. A future policy could apply different requirements in different areas where evidence supports doing so.

13. Are seawalls, armourstone or other hard structures always the best solution?

No. Hard protection may be appropriate for some important assets, but it can change how waves and sediment move and may affect nearby shorelines. Any intervention should be evaluated for the specific location, the asset being protected, neighbouring properties, environmental effects, expected life and long-term cost.

14. How can natural features help?

Beaches, dunes, wetlands and vegetated coastal areas can store floodwater, reduce wave energy, trap sediment and support habitat. Maintaining or restoring these features may reduce some impacts, but their effectiveness depends on shoreline type, wave exposure, available space, sediment movement and the assets at risk.

Homes and Property

15. Does this project mean existing homes or properties will have to move?

No decision has been made to require relocation. Planning for future change is one possible long-term approach, generally considered where a building or public asset cannot be safely or reasonably maintained.

Any future proposal affecting existing properties would require evidence, careful policy development, public discussion and the appropriate legal process.

16. Could future coastal policy affect how property is used or developed?

Potentially. Depending on the approach selected, future requirements could affect where or how new development, additions, rebuilding or redevelopment occur. They could also require additional information before development is approved.

No such changes are being adopted through this engagement project. The Municipality wants to understand concerns about property use, constrained lots, housing, affordability, working waterfronts, public access and the environment before considering next steps.

Taking Part

17. What does the Municipality want to hear from residents?

The Municipality wants to know:

- where people have observed flooding, erosion, storm damage or drainage problems
- which coastal places and community assets matter to them
- what changes they have noticed
- what benefits or concerns they see in different planning approaches
- how future planning should consider existing homes, businesses, working waterfronts and constrained properties
- which people, communities or perspectives may be missing from the conversation

Local experience can help identify issues that may not appear in regional maps or studies.

18. How will public feedback be used?

The project team will summarize feedback in a What We Heard Report. Comments will be considered together with available planning information, coastal and climate research, municipal responsibilities and technical limitations.

Engagement is not a vote on a single option. The feedback will help identify common priorities, different perspectives and issues that may require more information or discussion.

19. How can I participate?

Residents can:

- complete the online survey
- complete a paper survey
- attend a community engagement opportunity
- submit a comment card
- speak with the project team
- request telephone assistance or an accessibility accommodation

Paper surveys will be available at identified municipal and library locations. The survey closes November 2, 2026.

20. What happens after engagement?

The project team will review the feedback, identify common themes and prepare a What We Heard Report. The findings will help the Municipality consider whether further research, mapping, policy development or additional engagement is needed.

The findings will not automatically create new planning rules. Any future policy would require further municipal review, public notice and the appropriate approval process.

Where to Get More Information

Online survey: Complete the Pictou County Coastal Policy survey

Project information: Municipality of Pictou County website

Email: environment@munpict.ca

Telephone and accessibility support: 902-759-4666

Survey closing date: November 2, 2026

Sources and Further Reading

The background for this FAQ draws on the project's coastal and climate review, the Municipality of Pictou County's Municipal Climate Change Action Plan, and provincial climate information. Broader projections should not be interpreted as exact forecasts for individual properties.

- Municipality of Pictou County. Municipal Climate Change Action Plan, 2025.
- Province of Nova Scotia. Our Climate, Our Future: Nova Scotia's Climate Change Plan for Clean Growth, 2022.