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The effects of neighbourhood change for business owners on Agricola Street, Halifax.

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1.0 Summary

Agricola Street, located in the North End of Halifax, Nova Scotia, has been undergoing a slow process of change and revitalization over the last decade. Given the nature of increase in land values occurring, it appears that Agricola Street is experiencing gentrification: that is, the area is facing a process of social and spatial change which displaces lower income residents and the businesses they support as higher income residents and higher end businesses move into the neighbourhood. Studying changes in the character of the neighbourhood will help elucidate the perceived effects of gentrification on merchants in the area. The purpose of this case study is to understand the nature of changes occurring to businesses and business owners on Agricola Street in Halifax as the area experiences economic, social and spatial change.

2.0 Introduction

Local Context

Between 2007-2008 property assessment values increased by a considerable margin for commercial properties on Agricola Street; having remained the same for almost a decade prior, the new spike was alarming. Reports of tax assessments skyrocketing in the North End started surfacing, as well as reports of tax assessments on peninsular Halifax as a whole doing the same (Fraser, 2012). Earlier this year Chris Reardon, a local photographer and business owner, went on record saying that property tax increases had driven him to move his business from a space on Agricola Street to a less expensive location (Lambie, 2012). Speculation as to the cause of the rising property assessments varies: some claim that the ship building contract is a key contributing factor. Assessors, however, say that the assessments announced in January 2012 were based on 2010 data (Fraser, 2012); this means that current assessment rates could see even more of an increase in the years to come.

With small businesses being the main type of commercial venture on Agricola Street, a continued property tax increase could result in displacement of older tenants with newer, more affluent ones. With regard to this possibility, it seems that there are two different stories; one of Agricola Street “going in the right direction”, and one that shows business owners packing up their businesses and leaving. In support of the former, a local publication recently touted Joel Flewelling, equal parts owner (with Fred Connors) of Fred—a hair salon and restaurant on Agricola Street—as a “pioneer of the North End’s revitalization” saying, “The North End is arguably the most sought after neighbourhood in Halifax to live and do business. And many credit Flewelling and Connors for leading the charge” (Duckworth, 2012). While some see the increased values that have resulted from this kind of development as a positive thing, many others are experiencing uncertainty, doubt and fear with regard to their prospects in light of the increasing cost of running a business.

While business owners are keen to collaborate with planners and interested in supporting the “neighbourhood upgrade” that new proposed policies are promoting, there are many obstacles to being a small business owner on the street. These obstacles include a lack of incentives and a high real estate cost, as well as increasing property tax assessments. The city’s dealings with business owners to date have left some feeling unheard, and others feeling resigned to the impending changes. Business owners expressed feelings of being invested in the life of Agricola Street, and yet conversely a sense that they will have no say in new plans to change the neighbourhood.

An annual report from the Property Valuation Services Corporation put the overall commercial increase in property tax assessments at about 6 percent for Halifax (PSVC Annual

Report). Business owners on Agricola felt the pressure of the increased property values which drove up property tax payments as well as commercial rents. Given these findings, it appears that the neighbourhood is in the process of commercial gentrification. This study will contribute to the existing literature on commercial gentrification by providing a Canadian case in a smaller city than the currently available case studies on the topic.

Planning Context

HRM staff members are in the process of reviewing the Regional Municipal Planning Strategy for the region. Running concurrently with the five year review (RP+5) is the Centre Plan. The Centre Plan focuses on identifying areas of opportunity for growth in peninsular Halifax and downtown Dartmouth. These areas are called opportunity sites or growth corridors. Agricola Street has been identified as such a corridor. A briefing document from the HRM Centre Plan website states, “the current Land Use Bylaw (LUB) for this area focuses mainly on separating land uses, requirements for parking, distances between buildings and maximum heights. These zoning tools do little to encourage complete communities with a mix of uses, walkable streets, and protection of established neighbourhoods” (Public briefing document, HRM, 1). The first phase of the Centre Plan is intended to update the LUB and “to accommodate opportunities for well-designed development on this key corridor, while protecting the character and scale of surrounding neighbourhoods” (Public briefing document, HRM, 1). The current regulations are potentially changing, making it more attractive for developers to invest in Agricola Street. The changes in this phase focus largely on building height increases. An example can be seen on the corner of West Street and Agricola where a building that is currently two storeys would increase to six storeys.

HRM staff are confident this new change will promote growth in the area while protecting the character of the neighbourhood, but business owners are wary that the changes implemented will not blend in with the existing character and fabric of the neighbourhood as smoothly as the literature seems to suggest. The current regulations may be insufficiently addressing issues such as “a building that overwhelms its site, that does not positively contribute to the pedestrian experience, and which overshadows the adjacent neighbourhood” (Public briefing document, HRM, 2). The new regulations are said to remedy such problems by implementing design guidelines that make neighbourhoods more mixed use, walkable, and take aesthetic features that add to the value and character of the neighbourhood into account. Business owners, however, are experiencing a great deal of doubt and fear at the prospect of height increases, density increases, and, of course, business operating cost increases in the form of higher property tax payments. This study hopes to contribute to policy planning for the area by adding social insights to a planning problem.

2.1 Objectives

The case study has the following objectives:

1. To understand the impact of increasing property tax assessments on business owners on Agricola Street.
2. To describe the obstacles that business owners experience in the face of retail gentrification.
3. To assess business owner perspectives on policy change that can support businesses on Agricola Street.

2.2 Background

Gentrification is a process in which neighbourhoods that are characterized as lower income begin to transform as a result of the “gentry” or upper class moving into the neighbourhood. While some claim that gentrification is a form of urban renewal, others assert that it causes displacement and decreases low-income housing opportunities. Tom Slater (2011) suggests that gentrification negatively impacts and displaces low-income residents of neighbourhoods that undergo gentrification. By contrast, Richard Florida suggests that a mix of classes can increase the cultural capital of an area, and generate a more vibrant community. Murdie and Teixeira (2011) summarize the perspectives effectively saying that, “some researchers point to negative outcomes such as residential and commercial displacement, loss of affordable housing and the lessening of social diversity, while others emphasize positive effects such as the stabilisation of declining areas, reduced vacancy rates and increased social mix (Atkinson, 2004, p.112; Lees *et al.*, 2007, pp. 195–236; Nyden *et al.*, 2006, pp. 18–19)”. In a context where urban policy often promotes revitalization while calling for neighborhood stability and affordable housing, the tension surrounding gentrification has yet to be resolved.

Gentrification limits the availability of low-income housing (August & Walks, 2008; Maaranen & Walks, 2008; Slater, 2004, 2011); the effects of gentrification on specific locations can vary from “felt” perceptions (resident’s level of comfort in their neighbourhoods) to quantifiable experiences of living costs increasing in the given area (Mazer & Rankin, 2011; Skaburskis, 2008). These “felt perceptions” can result in a subtle process of exclusion which can be encouraged, albeit covertly, in policy (Rose, 2004). They can also be reinforced by “NIMBY” responses from residents or merchants (Rose, 2004). Furthermore, there is a dichotomy between perceived effects of gentrification by those moving into the area and those being pushed out (Mazer & Rankin, 2011; Slater, 2011; Wily, 2009). That is, while some view increases in property value and an influx of higher-end retail as neighbourhood *revitalization*, others view it as policy-assisted *gentrification* that causes displacement. As a result, displacement (as caused by gentrification) must be examined from the bottom up; that is to say, those being affected or displaced need to weigh in (Lees, 2003; Murdie & Teixeira, 2011; Rose, 2004; Slater, 2011; Wily, 2009). Finally, the effects of “commercial gentrification” on business owners have been insufficiently documented and can have negative impacts as property taxes or rents increase (August & Walks, 2008; Maaranen & Walks, 2008; Murdie & Teixeira, 2011; Rankin, 2010).

While “neighbourhood upgrade” has been used to describe a positive process of improvement and renewal, the negative effects associated with gentrification are undeniable. August & Walks (2008) assert that gentrification “is associated with declining stocks of affordable rental housing, displacement of the working class from the communities where they have traditionally lived and accessed services, the conversion of inner-city neighbourhoods from production to consumption spaces for the upper middle class, and speculative real estate markets that drive up the cost of housing across the metropolitan area” (Maaranen & Walks, 3). This notion of a neighbourhood being converted from a production space to a consumption space (Zukin, 3) is interesting from the perspective of understanding the impacts of neighbourhood change on business owners in a district. Zukin states, “the main victims of gentrification through loft living are these business owners who are essentially lower middle class, and their work force” (Zukin, 6). As Slater (2004) suggests, the effects of gentrification on working class and low income residents have been insufficiently documented. There is, however, overwhelming evidence that suggests that the impacts are largely negative on residents of areas that are in the process of being gentrified. The effects of gentrification

on business owners, however, are more complex. There is limited literature on the topic of commercial or retail gentrification. In her study of Toronto's West Central Neighbourhoods, Katharine Rankin defines commercial gentrification as, "the processes by which long-established businesses providing products and services affordable to low-income people are leaving downtown Toronto neighbourhoods and being replaced by establishments catering to more affluent users" (Rankin, iii). This study of a downtown Halifax neighbourhood adopts Rankin's definition of commercial gentrification.

The increases in property taxes reported in Halifax (Lambie, 2012; Fraser, 2012) suggest that Agricola Street is in the early stages of retail gentrification. Rankin delineates a "typology of different stages of commercial gentrification" (Rankin, 3). The three stages include not-gentrified, rapidly gentrifying, and gentrifying (Rankin, 3). The first stage points to lagging average property value changes; the second, to leading average property value changes; and the third, keeping close to average property value changes (Rankin, 3). Agricola Street, being roughly on par with citywide property value increases, fits into the third stage which is "gentrifying". Any property value increase is troubling for business owners. However, the notion that a middle class or elite clientele will be moving into the neighbourhood suggests that the results will, in the long run, be positive for at least some business owners in the area. Describing the business owners' experiences surrounding property value increases on Agricola Street can help to assess the impacts of commercial gentrification for the area.

Current literature has certain deficiencies in addressing the perspectives of the people who are displaced by gentrification. In their case study of Little Portugal in Toronto, Murdie and Teixeira (2011) state, "research has focused more on gentrifiers and the process of gentrification than on the experiences of non-gentrifiers living in the gentrifying neighbourhoods, many of whom are likely to be displaced as a result of gentrification" (Murdie & Teixeira, 62). This is a daunting task since those being displaced are often difficult to contact precisely because they have left the area. While residents are often victims of displacement, business owners, too, can be forced out as property taxes increase. In order to gain a better understanding of why people leave a gentrifying area, the experiences that current business owners are undergoing, the pressures or opportunities they face, must first be understood. Beyond the deficiencies in the perspectives of displaced tenants of gentrifying neighbourhoods, there is a further deficiency in the literature about commercial gentrification. Given their prominence on Agricola Street and the stage of gentrification in which they find themselves, business owners could provide that necessary perspective—that is, of the victims of displacement due to gentrification. On a main commercial street, the life of the street is influenced by the life of the businesses on that street. Gaining critical perspectives from business owners on the topic of policy change that could support businesses in the area is a crucial aspect of improving planning for the neighbourhood.

Rowland Atkinson (2004) claims that gentrification is often a policy-assisted process wherein government officials, planners, and policy makers actively encourage the process of gentrification because they either overlook or underestimate the degree of impact the process can have on a community or neighbourhood (Atkinson, 2004). His framework for recognizing the effects of gentrification (Figure 1) -- both negative and positive -- helps in identifying the level of change occurring in the case study area. When comparing the types of impacts beside each other, a larger number of negative impacts is revealed. In addition, many of the impacts identified as benefits of gentrification are, in the long run, counteracted by gentrification as the process continues. Furthermore, the framework suggests that what can begin as "neighbourhood revitalization", increasing social mix, decreasing crime, and stabilizing declining areas, can turn into a municipally assisted process of homogenization when loss of social diversity occurs, crime increases in surrounding areas, and property owners who can no longer afford to pay their property taxes leave

the neighbourhood, making way for larger investors and developers. Atkinson's framework can help to inform which effects business owners experience more strongly.

Table 3 Summary of neighbourhood impacts of gentrification

<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>
Stabilization of declining areas	Community resentment and conflict
Increased property values	Loss of affordable housing
Reduced vacancy rates	Unsustainable speculative property price increases
	Homelessness
Increased local fiscal revenues	Greater draw on local spending through lobbying by middle-class groups
Encouragement and increased viability of further development	Commercial/industrial displacement
Reduction of suburban sprawl	Increased cost and changes to local services
Increased social mix	Loss of social diversity (from socially disparate to affluent ghettos)
Decreased crime	Increased crime
Rehabilitation of property both with and without state sponsorship	Under-occupancy and population loss to gentrified areas
	Displacement through rent/price increases
	Displacement and housing demand pressures on surrounding poor areas
	Secondary psychological costs of displacement

Figure 1: Rowland Atkinson's (2004) summary of the effects of gentrification.

Describing the obstacles that business owners face during a "policy assisted" process of commercial gentrification will contribute to explaining the nature of the changes on the street.

2.3 Methods

Data Collection & Organization

Quantitative data included property tax assessment information for commercial properties in the study area since 2001. A comparative analysis of the businesses on Agricola Street (Census Tract 0020.00, dissemination area 090350) from 1999 (using the Might Business Directory for Halifax) as compared with present-day business information provided context for the trajectory of the life of

businesses on Agricola Street. This information also identified the ratio of commercial to residential properties, and provided a snapshot of business turnaround for the study area.



Figure 2: Agricola Street Study Area

Qualitative data consisted of 10 semi-structured, in-person interviews with business owners on a five-block portion of Agricola Street extending from Bloomfield Street to Charles Street (see Figure 2); this location contains a good variety of commercial uses including restaurants, pubs, music venues, antique stores and a hair salon. Changes that have been observed on Agricola Street suggest that gentrification is already occurring; in place of the controversy already prevalent, the study used the more neutral term of ‘neighbourhood change’ in the interviews with business owners. For the purposes of the presentation here the terms gentrification or commercial gentrification are used explicitly.

Interviews were scheduled by appointment at a location and time of the interview participants’ choosing. Interview times ranged from 15-30 minutes (see Appendix A for example questions). The North End Business Association (NEBA) agreed to become involved with the project and Bernard Smith, the head of the Association, provided logistical support in the form of contact information. With NEBA’s involvement the project had some potential of affecting policy change to address any issues business owners may identify.

Characteristics of Interviewees

Among the business owners interviewed one had recently sold his property and moved his business off Agricola Street, one was a business manager soon to take over the property from its

current owner, three were property owners, and five were leasing space for their businesses. Nine males and one female were interviewed; given the imbalance in the male to female ratio, the participants' gender was not considered a variable in the analysis. Of the ten interview participants, three lived in the neighbourhood while the remaining seven lived outside the neighbourhood. The majority of participants fell between the age range of 45-60 with only two participants being in the 25-35 age range and only one in the 36-44 age range.

In order to protect the confidentiality of interview participants, names have been removed and replaced with codes. All interviews took place in Halifax in 2012. The components of the code include the street (Agricola), type of interview participant (business owner) and number in the sequence of interviews conducted. That is, the first participant interviewed is called AB1 (Agricola-Business Owner-One) and so forth. Names of individual businesses have also been removed and replaced with a general business type (e.g.: furniture store, food retailer).

Data Analysis

Interview results were subjected to thematic analysis to identify key concerns and issues raised by participants: the aim was to clarify how business owners characterize the kinds of changes they are experiencing and their expectations about the influence of revitalization policy on businesses in the area. Business locations and types mapped from the Might Directory listings in 1999 were compared with business locations and types mapped from field visits in 2012 to assess the kinds of changes that took place. Policy documents such as the HRM Regional Municipal Planning Strategy, the HRM Cultural Plan, the HRMbyDesign Plan for Agricola Street, and the HRM Land Use by-law for the study area were examined to clarify current policy and identify opportunities for policy recommendations to be made.

The audience for this case study includes business owners on Agricola Street, as well as policy makers working for HRM and more specifically HRMbyDesign members working on the Centre Plan. The research could potentially inform the Centre Plan which identifies Agricola as a growth Corridor upon which new development is slated to happen pending Council approval and public hearing.

3.0 Findings

The burden of commercial property tax and the lack of supporting infrastructure

Findings from the quantitative data analysis revealed an increase in property tax payments in the area. Buildings in 1999 that still exist as commercial properties today were selected and tax assessments for a ten-year period beginning in 2001 were charted using a base one-hundred index (see Figure 3). The analysis revealed a noticeable increase occurring between 2007-2008. Prior to 2007 assessments remained constant or fluctuated very little. Furthermore, according to the *Might Business* directory, business types in 2012, as compared with 1999 have changed by approximately 50%; half of the commercial properties currently existing are recent (established within the last decade) and half have existed since 1999. When asked about the possible causes of increasing tax assessments, one interview participant stated:

AB2: I've talked to property tax assessors, and they say that they don't speculate about future value and that it's all based on factors from two years previous to the actual assessment. But I definitely think that some of the value that we're seeing is in expectation of the large investment that is about to go into Halifax due to the ship building contract that everyone talks about. We'll see how much of it actually trickles down.

The sudden increase that participant AB2 described was noted by all participants, which suggests that it has an impact on businesses on the street.

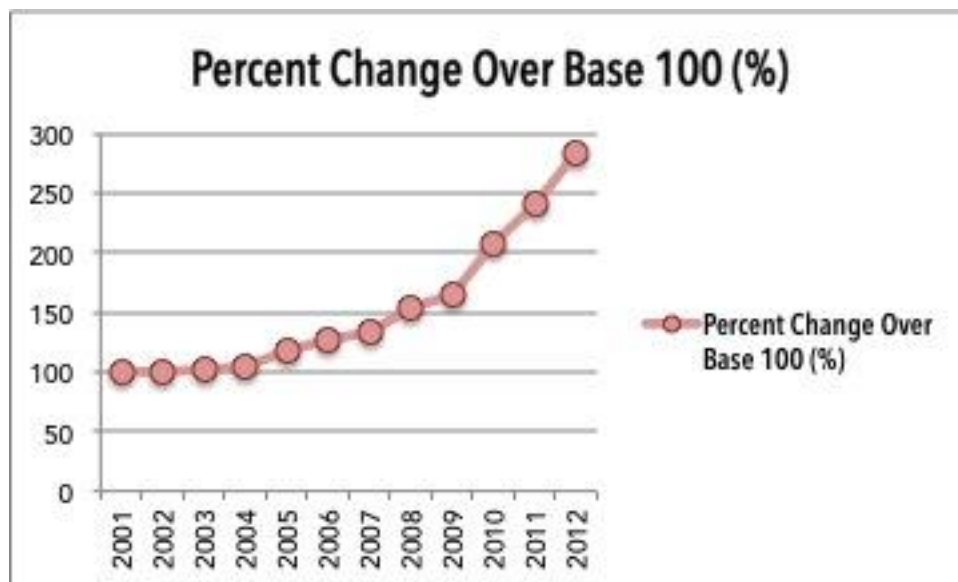


Figure 3: Commercial Property Assessment Percent Change [base 2001 = 100%]

The negative impact of increasing property values and property taxes/rents

AB1: The commercial taxes have become the major outflow of cash in the sustaining of my property. [...] The assessment of properties in the industrial parks is way below the assessment values placed on peninsula properties. You know, where my land is valued for assessment purposes at let's say \$35 a square foot, Bayer's Lake or Burnside could be \$8 a square foot. Yet they have a whole new infrastructure. They have marketing initiatives. And it puts small property owners on the peninsula at a

tremendous disadvantage. [...] As the little guys can't afford to sustain their properties, people come along that have more cash, buy up properties, and try and pull more money per square foot of land and building out of that particular site. So that changes the whole complexity of the neighbourhood ultimately.

Business owner's distrust or lack of faith in HRM planning staff quickly surfaced in the interviews. The theme became quite prominent as interviews progressed. Property taxes increasing in the area were seen, by some business owners interviewed, as being caused by a failure on the part of HRM's staff to control suburban sprawl and growth and to provide incentives for business owners to locate in the downtown core. Many identified changes in the area as the cause of the rising property assessments:

AB2: I've gone back and I've looked at previous property assessments, the value of the building and of the property itself. And for nearly 10 years, the value of that location remained the same. It went up and down in very small amounts. But then just in the last, I don't know, three years, every year there's been a dramatic increase in value. And there's no sign of that stopping. So you know, I am kind of being forced into making a move now because if I wait much longer, I might not be able to afford to buy the place any longer just because the value just goes up and up every year.

Participant AB2 worried about the increase in property assessment for the building he is hoping to take over from his current employer. If cost continues to increase he will be unable to purchase the building and ensure the life of the business; he fears a larger developer could buy the land and tear down the existing building in order to create a consolidated property. When asked about the possible reasons for the tax assessment increase, participant AB8 said:

AB2: Besides the portion of the property tax which we pay for the building, it has been going up consistently. And they're saying it's because it's playing catch up. That there was a gap where the city was saying, "Oh, poor little north end, they're depressed. They're not doing well. We'll freeze all property tax increases for commercial properties." And now that there's a shipbuilding contract, instantly there's been huge hikes in certain buildings. And they're kind of slowly honing in on our building. So I think there's going to be a big change shortly. [...] I think the property prices are inflated because of this promise of many, many jobs from the shipbuilding contract. And so the few landlords that there are in the city that are building collectors basically are snapping everything up. And so anything that's empty is prospected to become pretty high density.

Participant AB3, a multi-property owner on the street asserted that the increase in property taxes has forced an increase in the rent for tenants. Participants AB6 and AB10 commented on the experience of renting on Agricola Street. AB6, the manager of an arts related retail and workshop space, explained that there are few benefits to being a renter with a commercial lease. Participant AB10, a media company owner, seemed understanding of the position that property owners are finding themselves in. Nonetheless, he said, the increases contribute to his desire to leave the street and buy property elsewhere where he can have more control over the space. With the rent having increased approximately 8% each year and the area growing more and more popular, he is considering other possibilities since that increase shows no signs of stopping.

Beyond the burden of small businesses absorbing the cost of increased property assessments, many wondered as to the fairness of those increased rates and speculated about development practices in industrial parks, such as Bayer's Lake. They note contradictions in what planning policies say and what actually happens with regard to development in the city.

AB4: Our business group is lobbying the city and everything because our assessment rates are huge. We pay extra tax so that the city can give subsidies to people in Bayer's Lake to operate businesses. Which is absolutely horrendous. So you've got the city on one side wanting density and population, and going in what is a sensible direction. Yet, you've got the other arm of the city saying okay, we're just going to keep putting your taxes up and putting your taxes up, and then giving the money to urban sprawl, which they're against. So they're at total odds with each other.

In talking about HRM staff, business owners expressed a feeling of not being heard—of repeating themselves and not seeing signs that their suggestions or concerns had been taken into account. Participant AB5 stated that though business owners have expressed their concerns multiple times they are not seeing signs that those concerns have been taken into account. For example, one such concern is that the increased density will come in the form of multi-unit apartment buildings. Participant AB4 claimed that this type of development, while necessary, cannot be the only form of development otherwise it will result in homogeneity. Interview participants pointed to a holistic planning approach that involves multiple, layered factors and claim that the tax assessments, though based in an attempt to spur development, may be hindering healthy growth for the neighbourhood, by encouraging large-scale developments. One former business owner offered feedback on the effects of increased taxes aside from the actual increase in tax payments, and provided insight as to how other developers might view the current development trends in the neighbourhood. He said that rents and real estate value have increased which has caused some to sell their properties. It has caused other developers, he continued, to buy properties with the hope that larger developments will follow. Consequently, this activity has caused an increase in property values and, in effect, an increase in tax assessments. Since these values are based on supply and demand, he worried they may not reveal an 'accurate stable value'. He said:

AB9: One could also argue that it's a city's way to grab money. Which, you know, understandably. It costs money to run a city. But at the same time, if your small businesses can't afford to run themselves, eventually they shut down [...] So if anything, small business should be getting incentives, not penalties for running. They should be getting encouragement. They should be getting support. Because in fact, I think they are the backbone of any city.

Given these trends, smaller businesses, some participants claim, will be pushed out. Participant AB10 explained that owning a business in the downtown core is a calculated risk and is becoming increasingly risky. As a result businesses look to locate in "fringe" areas such as Agricola Street. He explained:

AB10: [Property increases in the core result in] a trickle down impact. And right now Agricola has seen a high demand over the last 4 or 5 years for buildings to the point where the building prices have been going up and up, and then the property taxes go up and up. And the poor person who's bought and paid for their building, and had a model that affords that building for years, now can't afford it because their property taxes are too high.



Image 1: Bach's Café on Agricola Street has been sold; the former café will be converted into an esthetic salon.

Some participants blamed the city or tax assessors, while others pointed to development in the area, and still others saw the growth as a demand that needed to be supplied; that is, if the area is growing and becoming more attractive, people will want to run their businesses out of it, and those people will be small business owners, and large-scale developers. In that sort of market, those who cannot afford the price of running a business will be forced to move to areas in which doing so is still economically viable. There was no consensus over who is to blame or what caused increasing assessments, but business owners agreed on their perceptions of HRM planning staff and the City's handling of the changes occurring in the area.

The lack of supporting infrastructure and urban design features to support the proposed increased density

Lack of supporting infrastructure on Agricola Street was a theme in 8 out of 10 interviews. With the exception of two interviewees, business owners discussed what they perceived as the lack of parking on the street. On-street parking on Agricola Street is operating at only 50% of its capacity during the peak hours of the day (Josh DeJong, unpublished research data) and yet business owners feel that more is needed. The talk of a new Crosstown Connector project which proposes a bike lane along Agricola Street has most merchants worried. Bike lanes, they claim, are good for the city and for people, but a main commercial corridor with small businesses along the street is not the place for them. They argue that the bike lane should occupy a neighbouring, residential street. A loss of on-

street parking, they say, could be devastating to a small business. Some point to the general lack of infrastructure improvements done to the street over the years. Participant AB3 claimed that both bike lanes and more commercial parking were needed but that a compromise must be reached where one is not suffering from the effects of the other. He said that the North End Business Association is specifically working toward halting the implementation of a bike lane. The life of the street, the character and community-feel of the street, are important factors of the equation. Participant AB4 expressed a desire to contribute to the community feeling by supporting community-building events such as the “Switch” event where a street is closed to automobiles and activities for cyclists and pedestrians are organized. Business owners said that community building elements, however, cannot be to the detriment of parking infrastructure which the proposed bike lanes threaten. Participant AB8, a food retail store owner and operator, suggested multiple planning policy approaches that could improve and support small business practices on the street. Prominent among the recommendations was the notion of aesthetic and architectural upgrade and beautification. Beyond elements that make the street more visually appealing business operators wanted more practical elements, such as trash bins, street cleaning, winter maintenance (etc.) which are currently lacking.



Image 2: “Creative Crossing” on the corner of Agricola and Charles Street. Many business owners fear that the loss of store-front parking will cripple their businesses.

The main point in discussing the lack of infrastructure on the street is that when coupled with the increase in tax assessments, business owners feel that they are paying for services they are not receiving. Some even say that they would be more comfortable with the increased property assessments if they saw improvements in their surroundings to reflect that increase. Many feel that they are being asked to pay for benefits they do not feel they are receiving. Density is good, said participant AB9, but it cannot be implemented without first adding supporting infrastructure:

AB9: I've always been a proponent of increased density in cities because it can potentially really add to the life and vibrancy of a city. The challenge is doing it well and supporting that density with all the appropriate infrastructure and planning. If you start to just add density and you don't support it with things like additional parking, with additional security, you know, if there's no sort of design guidelines as to what's appropriate and what's not, it can become a real mess. And so I think that density for density sake is not a smart move. Density well done with great intention has to be supported with the right planning and infrastructure. If they don't do that it will be a mess. So nobody will win.

Increased attention to smaller details that make the street more liveable and walkable are important to business owners. These changes, however, cannot be in the form of removing on-street parking. Business owners see an increase in traffic as a positive thing but for that increase to be sustainable at the local level new amenities need to be added including trash receptacles, more parking, aesthetic upgrades to building facades as well as structural upgrades to make buildings more durable.

Infrastructure is a main factor in business owners' decision to stay on the street or to move their businesses. Participant AB10 claimed that he would consider buying a building in a more affordable area if parking was removed from the street and replaced with a bike lane. Other participants expressed dissatisfaction with the services they received relative to the amount they pay for their properties. In the light of recent increases this is even more of a driving factor in owners wanting to leave the street. Participant AB10 claimed that the changes would detract from the appeal of owning a business in the area since there is not much foot traffic and much of his clientele travels from other neighbourhoods. Taking away parking would cripple that business and other businesses like it that rely primarily on clients from other parts of the city and who do not attract many "walk-in" visitors. Importantly, participant AB10 claimed that while the increase in operating costs may drive him to move his business elsewhere, this change to the neighbourhood may not necessarily be a bad thing. He stressed the fact that increases in density, changes to buildings and business types, and an influx of more affluent clientele demanding higher-end products may very well be positive for Agricola Street.



Image 3: There are few trash receptacles on Agricola Street, a feature of concern to many business owners.

Designer cupcakes and social sanitizing: who benefits from neighbourhood change?

Damaris Rose (2004) interviewed gentrifying tenants moving into a low-income Montreal neighbourhood. Though her findings are related to residents and not business owners in the area, her results are informative in light of this case study. While interviewing condo purchasers Rose noted that gentrification had occurred with municipal consent and assistance in an attempt to repopulate the city. Rose divided respondents into four categories: ‘ignorants’, ‘nimbies’, ‘tolerants’, and ‘egalitarians’. Business owners on Agricola Street expressed similar views about low-income residents of the neighbourhood as Rose’s “nimbies”; Rose writes that nimby responders claimed that living beside low-income or affordable housing was not good for the neighbourhood. New growth was seen as a positive and the existing low-income housing suddenly became problematic. Such thinking reflects urban policy supporting “social mix” and, Rose asserts, is related more to the marketing of a city than what is “good” for a city or neighbourhood. She says, “post-industrial cities have a growing interest in marketing themselves as being built on a foundation of ‘inclusive’ neighbourhoods capable of harmoniously supporting a blend of incomes, cultures, age groups and lifestyles” (Rose, 281). The difficulty, however is that planning for this type of diversity often involves income mix and mix of housing tenures (Rose, 280). The mix that is actually produced is then seen as directly contradicting that “harmonious” lifestyle that the marketing promotes. Such “liveability” comes with a price: among “policies to create such ‘liveability’ many involve ‘socially

sanitizing' urban space" (Rose, 282). As a result, Rose writes, "arguably, the focus on increasing the tenure mix in the inner city does amount to what Slater (2004) sees as municipal promotion of gentrification" (Rose, 288).

This 'social sanitizing' that Rose describes, arguably, has already taken place on Agricola Street. As business owners moved in with higher-end retail and began initiatives to clean up the street, move the prostitution, drug use and crime off the main retail strip, they essentially "sanitized" the lower income populations from visible public space in front of their stores. This can be viewed as improvement, upgrade, or revitalization. According to Slater, however, this is precisely the type of development and activity that drives gentrification related displacement. The early displacement of lower-income residents, however, now runs the risk of being compounded by a second wave of gentrification where the medium income residents and business owners will be forced out. Already rents are too high for some as is evidenced by owners selling their properties and moving elsewhere. It seems that as an area becomes more attractive, as more effort is put into developing a reputation for a neighbourhood, it becomes more sought after; people want to be a part of it—they want to own property and run businesses and live there.

Zukin (1998) describes the process of creating a "symbolic economy". A symbolic economy, according to Zukin, is "based on such abstract products as financial instruments, information and "culture"—i.e. art, food, fashion, music and tourism" (Zukin, 826). She quotes Leach in saying that this symbolic economy can be seen as, "acquisition and consumption as the means of achieving happiness; the cult of the new; the democratization of desire; and money value as the predominant measure of all value in society" (Zukin, 828). This process is begun by gentrifiers creating the symbolic economy and then building it, contributing to it by writing about it, and writing themselves into it as key players (Zukin, 831). As a result of this symbolic economy and its administrators, consumption spaces take on the task of meeting this demand; "institutionalized in coherent consumption spaces, this demand effectively displaces lower income urban residents who cannot afford higher rents on taxes, and do not want latte bars serving an exotically wide variety of coffees and milk" (Zukin, 832). While this is with reference to residents, the same can be said for business owners. As one interview participant said, many business owners are just looking to sustain a modest lifestyle and are not majorly profit driven. The symbolic economy that is being perpetuated in the area is contributing to the reputation of Agricola Street as a hotspot, a hub, a place to be. And still, this type of a reputation contributes, as well, to the desire of newcomers to appropriate that "diverse mix" and make it part of their persona, part of their symbolic economy, an item to be consumed. The resulting displacement of those who no longer contribute to the symbolic economy, who are not its drivers, are excluded from these consumption spaces by virtue of their inability to conform.



Image 4: Businesses that have existed on the street for many years are changing to attract a wider clientele.

Atkinson (2003) suggests that exclusionary tactics are subtle. He refers to Lees' discussion of a public library in Vancouver saying she, "finds tensions in the use of the space with both excluding and diverse processes at work which make analysis of whom the space is for more difficult to interpret" (Atkinson, 2003:1832). While there may not be direct policies of exclusion, people are excluded in almost unidentifiable ways often based on class. One such example is the design of park benches that prevent anyone lying on them to sleep. He describes a "desire to eradicate those publics who represent non-consuming citizens" (Atkinson, 1832). In public spaces, then, the comfort of consumers has been deemed more important than the welfare of the non-consumers; "non-consumption is a form of deviance" (Atkinson, 1834).

Jamie Peck makes a similar argument in his critique of Richard Florida's book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*. He writes that, "urban fortunes increasingly turn on the capacity to attract, retain and even pamper a mobile and finicky class of 'creatives', whose aggregate efforts have become the primary drivers of economic development" (Peck, 740). He argues that Florida's claim that cities need to becoming more welcoming for 'creatives', in effect ensures that non-creatives will be made to feel unwelcome. The people who are do not fit under Florida's three T's (technology, talent, and tolerance) that drive the "new economy" are considered 'passengers' in a car being 'driven' by creatives. Furthermore, Peck posits, the working-class faction of society that does not hold creative jobs or "drive the new economy" is actually tasked with supporting the habits and lifestyles of creatives who demand services but, at the same time, eschew public sector jobs and have a penchant for expertly made designer coffees; creatives need, he writes, "the space to 'actualize their identities'" (Peck, 744).

Peck describes the needs of creatives (as represented by a series of interviews done by Florida) as beyond material. Creatives are, “not simply motivated by material rewards, like salaries and stock options and suburban security, but instead wanted to live exhilarating lives in interesting places, to be challenged and stimulated 24/7. Particular jobs would come and go—such is the nature of the new, creative economy. What really [matters], the as yet unnamed creative class revealed, were these magnetic ‘qualities of place’” (Peck, 745). These abstract ‘qualities’ are compounded, of course, by more specific demands such as a desire for “authenticity” and an “organic” or natural quality in food, buildings, people, and services. The creative class demands more out of life, claims Florida, and is not appeased with a job that is not fulfilling or exciting. Part of the argument in *The Rise of the Creative Class* is for elevating that struggling lower class to the same level as the thriving creative class; finding the solution to the non-creatives collective problem, he says, is the ‘work’ of the creatives (Florida, 2005). Which begs the question, Peck writes, “of who will launder the shirts in this creative paradise” (Peck, 757).



Image 5: The subtle process of exclusion referred to by Rose can be perpetuated by a street having no public meeting spaces that are not linked to retail services; in these spaces, non-consumers are excluded.

Peck’s critique of Florida’s argument is scathing. The lack of consideration for the needs of the working-class or low-income factions of gentrifying neighbourhoods is, in some cases, not intentional. Indeed, this is Peck’s main complaint: by selfishly seeking self-actualization through consumption of and subscription to the “symbolic economy”, creatives and gentrifiers disregard the needs of a class that they rely on to support their routines. Beyond the critique of creatives, however, there is a degree of truth to the notion that “quality of place” is becoming a more popular reason for choosing a place to live over the traditional motivator of finding gainful employment

(according to research conducted by the Knight Foundation and Dr. Katherine Loflin in the “Soul of the Community” project).

On Agricola Street, the mix of businesses is still balanced between high and middle income. Those businesses offering higher-end retail, however, are aiming to attract a higher-income clientele to the neighbourhood. Financial gain is not the only motivating factor for many business owners and, with the exception of one person, interviewees described a sense of attachment to the neighbourhood in which they chose to start their businesses. Buying a property along the street a decade ago was a calculated risk. When asked about reasons for buying property in an area that was, at the time, more run down, business owners explained that the proximity to the downtown core of the street, as well as the relative affordability of buying or leasing property, were attractive features. Now that the street is beginning to develop and evolve both aesthetically and economically, business owners expressed a sense of pride in playing a large part in pioneering that development. This development, then, is seen as improvement, as revitalization. Business owners are seen as “upgrading” or “improving” the clientele on the street by creating a higher-quality experience for them; creating a supply for that demand. Indeed they were seen as adding to that elusive “quality of place”. Not all merchants saw this change in the neighbourhood as unquestionably positive. Some expressed concern for their own businesses, the residents of the neighbourhood, and over the decreasing availability of services that cater to the needs of low-income people. One business owner explicitly claimed that low-income residents should not be driven out but worked into the fabric of the neighbourhood. Some describe the exclusion of those members of the neighbourhood as being positive.

One merchant pointed to a time approximately five years ago when the street was described as being overrun by prostitution, drug use, and crime. A small food retail space owner, he described his impression of that time in the history of the street as well as his views on the “clean-up” that occurred:

AB4: [T]he big thing you have to realize in this area was this area was completely trash. It used to be a very vibrant area of the city. And then quite some years ago, the city father's in their wisdom just penciled the thing to move all these low income families into the core of the city and everything where they didn't have jobs, didn't have work. [...] And our area went from being a very pleasant sort of north end community into having hookers, drug addicts, crack addicts, you name it. It was extremely bad here.

He went on to say that in conjunction with the Halifax Police Department, a group of business owners worked together to move some of that undesirable activity off the main streets. While the area continues to have some problems, he continued, it is “coming around gradually”. A home décor store operator described the influx of higher-end retail stores as contributing to attracting a different and more affluent clientele to the street. He claimed that the street has changed a great deal and become a destination after a few pioneering businesses set the precedent for higher-end retail. He stated:

AB9: The street has really changed a lot. [...] I was kind of the first retailer that was a destination retailer to move onto the street. And I was on my own like that for about a year before XX opened his business on the corner ... And so our two businesses, I think, set the tone for what was going to come because we both were targeting I guess you would call a higher end client, and we were also both destination businesses.

The owner of a home décor store credited participant AB9 as the first to open his business on the street when there were no high-end retail stores there. He made a point of saying that before any other retailers were attracted to the area participant AB9 took a big risk in opening his business, precisely because the market was so unpredictable at the time, and the business types so out of keeping with the type of business he was opening. Participant AB7 stated that one business ushered in a new era of development on the street and made it more conceivable for other similar businesses to locate there. In this way one operator was identified as pioneering the notion of Agricola Street as a destination street.

Agricola Street as a cultural & artistic hub with a unique mix of classes and business types

The unique cultural mix, heterogeneity of business types, and the presence of arts and design related businesses on the street contribute to Agricola Street's reputation as a cultural and artistic hub. Participant AB4 described the ethnic and cultural cohesion in the area saying,

This area is very unique, probably for the world, not just Halifax. And we have a tremendous mix of people here – ethnic and otherwise. It's not at all uncommon in here to see Jewish girls come in here and buy stuff, and Iranians come in here in the same store. And we even have in our store people who are Muslims and Christians and Jewish people and everything working here. It's a real melting pot. But we do get along extremely well together. And it's the success of this area.

For participant AB5, an operator of a restaurant and music venue, the interesting character of the neighbourhood resulted from the comingling between relatively wealthy and low-income individuals on the street, and specifically a new relationship between young and old in the area. He described the time when students and younger patrons started “rubbing elbows” with the “original” customers in his establishment. This type of interaction, he said, is crucial to the life of a neighbourhood and can contribute to an area having a more dynamic and diverse population. The location of the street and its proximity to downtown played a major role in this new mix of people (AB5). Participant AB5 compared living in the North End of Halifax to living in larger, more metropolitan cities such as Montreal and Toronto. He said that living in the North End, for a student, seemed like a great opportunity after having lived in “divey” neighbourhoods in larger cities while paying much higher rent. The location of the neighbourhood, the relative quality of the living accommodations, and the access to shops and services, makes Agricola Street attractive to a younger population.

Again, this type of mixing and evolution of the street is credited in part to business owners in the area. Participant AB5 also described how a change in his business model increased the number of people visiting his business and, in turn, the street. If students had not been welcomed and businesses had not changed to cater more to their needs, the neighbourhood would not have as strong a chance of sustaining a young/student demographic. Adaptation in these businesses allows for new clientele and increased clientele of varying demographics. For example, participant AB5 explained how a recent addition of a higher-end food vendor operating out of his property during the day has increased foot traffic and patronage by a considerable margin. Business owners saw this type of evolution and resilience in small businesses as a major contribution to the life of the street.

Excitement for increased density

Despite the efforts on the part of business owners to revitalize the area and bring in new clients, running a small business in the area is a struggle. Many point to the lack of foot traffic, even taking

the recent increase into account. Business owners are excited by the prospect of an increase in the population on Agricola Street; the thinking is that an increase in people means an increase in spending and that an increase in revenue, more improvements can be made to building facades and special care can be taken to improve the design and walkability of the street.

Part of the discussion here, however, turned to concerns about the possibility of low-income housing as a part of that “increased density”. Participant AB4 defined the benefits of increased density from an economic and ecological perspective; he said that the opposite of density, urban sprawl, is only cheaper than density if the land is more affordable in areas outside of the urban core. In reality, he claimed, density is more ecologically responsible and affordable, and should be encouraged. He said

AB4: Living in the city becomes much more attractive and everything. [...] So our footprint, human footprint, is reduced dramatically by increasing urban density and having more people living in a denser area.

Participant AB4 touched on a topic that was common for other business owners as well. He noted that making living in the downtown more attractive would provide a boost to the population and the economy of the area. In this sense the proposed densification is positive. Furthermore, there are other positive effects that go along with that sort of “improvement”. Participant AB5 asserted that density could contribute to liveability by improving the “neighbourhood feel” of the area. He said:

AB5: Three of the most important things – density, density, density. [laughs] Location, location, location is the old one. Now it's density, density, density. You have to have people interacting with each other, bumping into each other [...] We're not one person per mountain. We are people that like to live together close by. [...] And the more people, the better.

Amongst the support for density, however, is a good deal of uncertainty as to how that density will be administered and controlled by HRM planning staff and council members. There is also a fear that “the right kind of density” is not achievable and that attempts to increase density might result in sprawl. Participant AB2 explained why increasing density in the area could potentially displace some business owners due to the high cost:

AB2: The thing is that a lot of the businesses that exist in this neighbourhood are old businesses. And a lot of them paid for themselves back in the '70s and '80s, and have been cooling their heels since then. A lot of them aren't necessarily majorly profit-driven ventures. These are people who just want to live their lifestyle and afford their work. And more and more of them are finding it harder and harder to stay afloat because their market hasn't changed but their expenses have gone up considerably.

Many interviewees expressed a sense of anxiety or distress over the possibility of being displaced.

3.3 Fear and uncertainty about the future

HRMbyDesign and the Centre Plan- Is the trade off worth the sacrifice?

Current plans to increase density along the Agricola Street “corridor” have left some business owners feeling uncertain of whether the benefits of such development would be positive enough to offset the difficult transition period that will come with actually constructing that density. The ship

building contract that many have claimed will cause an influx of people to the downtown core, does not seem a strong enough reason to build that much density, for some:

AB1:

The Agricola Street neighbourhood is really just a regular street in a small town in Canada. I mean it's not exceptional. I think it's been damaged too by the municipal and provincial efforts to leverage the shipyards contract as being some kind of utopian dream of money flowing in the streets. But you know, we've seen it's been effective in buoying up people's hopes and dreams, and pushing up land values for residential properties. But the reality is there is no contract for the ships at this point in time. It's a government project that may or may not happen. And it's a bit irresponsible for the city and the province to be turning it into some kind of a salvation for the Halifax area.



Image 6: On going construction on Agricola Street could disrupt business.

Still others say that the Centre Plan is a great idea but that it needs to be handled with care and take into account the nature of the street. Is the plan going to leave small businesses vulnerable to big development? Participant AB2 claimed that the transition from “mom and pop” stores to larger investors could eliminate the “local vibe” that comes with lower height allowances and smaller buildings. This possibility makes some business owners nervous, he explained. The cost increases could drive some merchants to move to other parts of HRM.

AB2: And the big fear there is that these mom and pop shops that have been around for a long time and have sort of kept the neighbourhood local, and that everybody loves and is a part of the Centre

Plan, you know, they want to promote local business and have options for small businesses in these neighbourhoods... But if they're scaring them off then what that does is it leaves their properties open to bigger investors who are more likely to exploit them and aren't necessarily local investors.

Participant AB2 summarized some key issues saying that while the plans are exciting and present a positive opportunity for the neighbourhood, the time of transition that will take place before those changes are finalized is sure to affect current business owners and operators. Merchants are concerned that they will suffer through construction and neighbourhood change only to be pushed out because of ever-increasing tax payments and business costs and, as a result, never see the benefits of that new development:

AB2: I haven't seen a big influx of people coming from renewed density yet. But we haven't seen all the density that we're supposed to be expecting yet. So once again, that's that kind of volatile gap that we're in, where we're not seeing the increase in clientele but we're being expected to pay the higher value for what's coming down the pipes.

The notion that HRM's handling of the plans for increased density will play a heavy role in determining the future of the neighbourhood was prominent in participants' answers. Participant AB4 attributed the increase in property tax assessments and business costs to the city and claimed that setting a fair tax rate was the city's responsibility. He said that even though business owners have expressly stated that they need support to continue operating, he felt that city officials had ignored their pleas. He asserted that the new proposals for the Centre Plan had gone in a "poor direction" even after local input.

Similarly, participant AB5 stated that whether people get pushed out or not was in the hands of HRM planning staff. He worried that if the current trends continued there would be no middle ground to be reached but rather that the neighbourhood would become increasingly more expensive. He saw any increase in business operating costs as negative and was concerned about the impact on the neighbourhood.

When asked about the future cost of operating a business in the area, participant AB8 predicted an increase and said that a well-planned neighbourhood could help to alleviate the discomfort of that increase:

AB8: I see definitely prices going up. And if it's not coordinated to have low income and middle income as well as high end things all coexisting then there won't be an interesting or dynamic enough fabric of life.

He went on to say that the existing tension between the different demographics in the area may become more volatile if the area is not planned to support cultural and class cohesion:

AB8: I think this neighbourhood is up and coming and it's close to downtown, and there's a lot of great interesting old houses that have an appeal to a progressive, edgier professional or someone who is decently well off in the grand scheme. But then there's also a really poor faction of the neighbourhood that often doesn't intermix with everybody else that's kind of here. So there's a population battle, it seems. So there's an undercurrent of social war or a class divide. Which if there isn't enough cohesion and public spaces where people are comfortable from all walks of life then there might be more friction and it will definitely kill the vibe.

The opportunity, he went on to say, could come in the form of infrastructure and design that promote use of public spaces by a variety of different types of people. He also stated that the

underlying and unspoken disowning or exclusion of low-income residents, drug addicts, and prostitutes, is not productive. Since those populations are related to living in any city efforts should be made, he claimed, to support rather than alienate those citizens struggling on the fringes of society. He said:

AB8: I mean we have to somehow figure out a way to incorporate that existence into the village that could be really cool. So there's a lot of xenophobia, as is the case in all of North America. But NS is renowned for it. And Halifax is the centre of NS. So it's made up of rural people that have, you know, old school rural mentalities towards others, including themselves. So there's a need for some really deep thinking and soul searching when it comes to city planning.[...] I mean there has to be a mosaic. [...] There should be helpful and useful services that will speak to a certain demographic that lives here.

Crucial to this type of support is a sense of security on the street at all hours, he said. That is, a sense that there is some level of activity at all times so that the street does not empty out as the sun goes down.

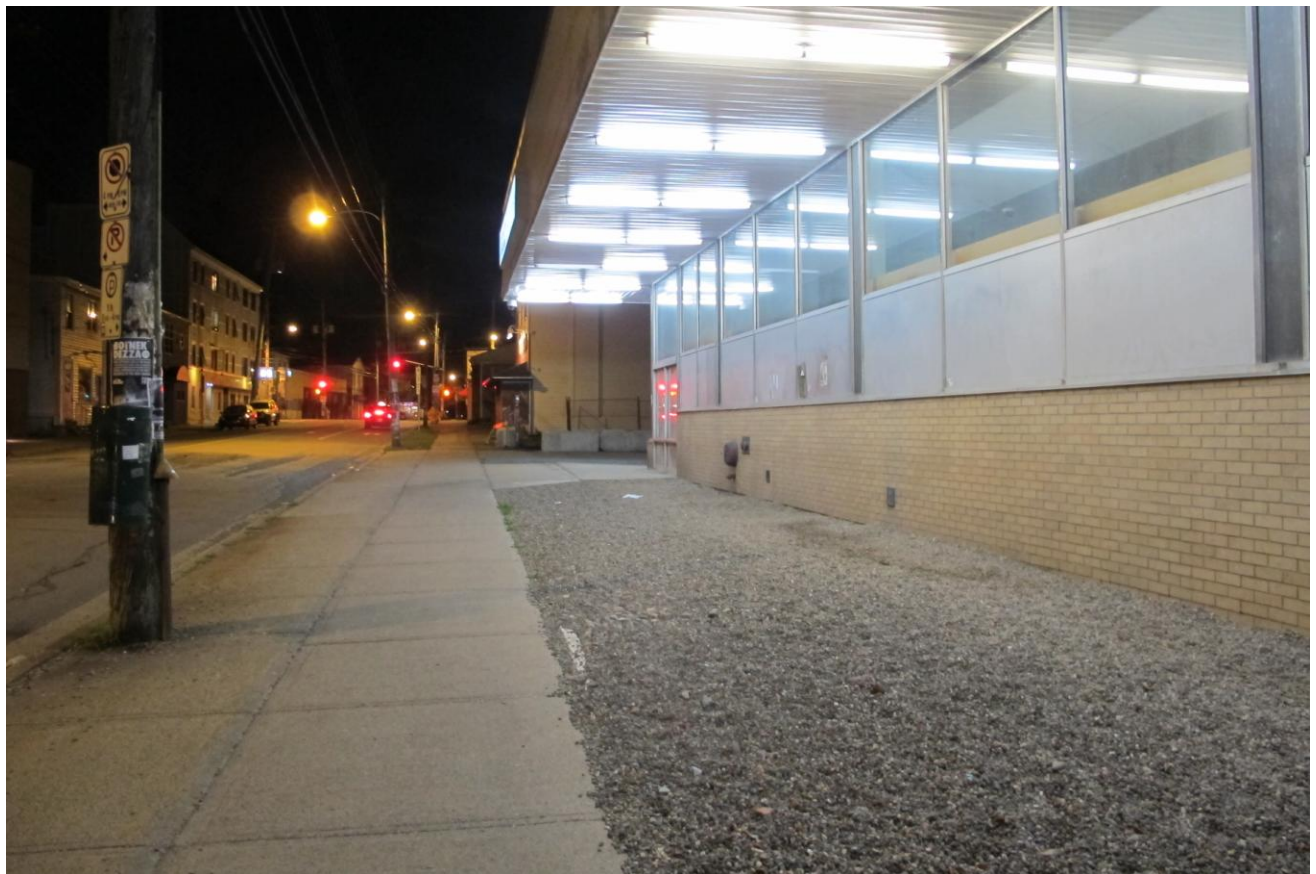


Image 7: Agricola Street largely empties after dark.

He referred to Jane Jacobs and her theory that “eyes on the street” promote a sense of unity among residents in a given neighbourhood. This unity, he explained, is currently lacking; there are merchants with divergent visions and city officials with yet more ideas of what the street needs. And while business owners might agree on some common goals for the street, expressing those goals to

planners and city officials can be challenging. Some participants expressed a feeling that if the requests they made were deemed inconvenient, they were ignored. One way that planning practices for the area could be improved to better support businesses is by more actively listening to input from business owners:

AB2: I've gone to a number of meetings, and the first consultations, they've seemed great and everybody's listening to each other and giving these ideas. But then when you're brought back to the [Center Plan], a lot of things got disregarded. So I'm much more worried about the business owners and the property owners giving up their land for the money, and then having it open to exploitation. I think that that should be our first line of defence is making sure that the businesses that are here have an environment in which they can thrive.

There is a great deal of excitement but also a degree of trepidation. Business owners express an initial enthusiasm that was, in some cases, replaced with disappointment and fear as time progressed and new plans were revealed for the Centre Plan. There is a possibility, then, that this new development could boost the economic state of Agricola Street. The fear, however, is that new development would adversely affect that community feeling that citizens and merchants value.

Loss of community feel

While the economic growth of the neighbourhood is an attractive idea, and the evolution and development of a neighbourhood is inevitable and necessary, the cost for that growth may be a loss of that unique character of a growing neighbourhood. Participant AB6 said that many people living in the neighbourhood are resistant to the changes being proposed. She said that many are saddened by the changes happening and fear that those changes will lead to the exclusion or displacement of low-income members of the community. Already, she claimed, people living in the area are struggling to keep up with the increase in living costs. Businesses have changed along the street and many cater to more affluent clientele which can be problematic for low-income residents who cannot keep up. This change, while not necessarily bad, has an effect on the way the street is composed and the type of people who will use it.

Whether this is negative or positive depends on who is asked. Business owners think that more affluent street-goers appreciate the higher-end quality and the aesthetic upgrades, while long-time residents and business owners, in some cases, perceive this change as a threat. In this sense the changes that are occurring on the street can be doubly described as progress and as destruction of the existing fabric of the street. Participant AB6 stated that she tends to be more passive in her decision to support or not support the different proposals brought forward over the past few years. She noted that while this is partially due to the fact that development is very slow to start in Halifax, she also holds this attitude because she feels partially resigned to the changes. That is, that progress is inevitable and fighting against it is neither productive nor meaningful.



Image 8: Some fear that increased development and density could take away from the distinct charm that current Agricola Street businesses offer.

In a certain sense this resignation could be seen as a reflection of city policies and public participation methods that may not adequately support citizens to feel empowered and invested in a future vision for their neighbourhoods and communities. Beyond the lack of personal empowerment in the city planning process, participant AB6 expressed a lack of faith in the competency of city officials and their ability to follow through with the projects they plan, advertise, and support. She gave the example of empty lots that sit vacant for many years, all the while advertising new developments “coming soon”. Affecting change in Halifax, then, becomes a doubly cumbersome task; first because it is difficult to have one’s voice heard as a citizen, and secondly because even if change is approved the timeline for that change to be implemented is too long.

Participant AB9 expressed a similar reservation to participant AB6 in saying that the type of neighbourhood that promotes a mix of uses and is, as a result, more interesting and desirable to live in could be jeopardized by the impending changes. He wondered whether that vibrant “neighbourhood feel” can ever be effectively planned or whether it occurs organically. He attributed organic and grassroots community organization partially to citizens’ vested interest in the street. That is, feeling that citizens have a stake in the neighbourhood and ensuring that community members can plan their own communities is what gives life to a place, not zoning regulations and profit based development procedures:

AB9: And I think that that’s how great neighbourhoods and great streets happen, is when you allow the residents a lot more ownership of it. When [...] your neighbourhood has a much greater stake at

what's going on and much more say, and is, to a certain degree, left to their own devices, I think you're going to get a much more interesting street.

He asserted that discouraging suburban development, incentivizing small, local businesses, and letting community members have a greater degree of control over the vision for their neighbourhoods would help to create a more vibrant street and foster the "community feel" that is so crucial:

AB9: I think the minute you get too intrusive is when it just loses the character. Like if I was to compare it, Queen West in Toronto was an amazing street throughout the '80s and into the early '90s. And then what started to happen is the big stores moved in. So you had a giant Le Chateau and a giant Club Monaco. And so I guess what happened was that it just became like any other street. It lost its character.

No one interviewed suggested that growth stop on the street. There is a fear being expressed, though, that if the area is overly planned it could lose its distinctive charm.

4.0 Policy Implications

Given the nature of responses amongst interview participants, making an authoritative statement about suggested changes to policy is not possible. Because participants were divided in some ways, in those areas the different policy changes possible can be elucidated but not unreservedly recommended. Some these policy implications include contradictory suggestions. For example, some business owners may have agreed with a recommendation that stated, “create social services for the residents who need access to them” and “invest in public spaces that promote inclusivity and social cohesion”. There are other business owners, however, who expressly claimed that the street is a better place without the presence of prostitutes and drug-addicts. For those business owners, the aforementioned recommendation would fly in the face of everything they worked toward.

Beyond the lack of consensus of what Agricola Street *needs* from a social perspective, from an economic perspective some of the changes recommended by business owners may not be entirely realistic or even possible. For example, someone suggesting a cap on rents in the area or tax breaks for small business owners may not be fully aware of the economic landscape that causes those increases. There are some recommendations, however, that all business owners agreed upon and which warrant further inquiry. Those recommendations all fall within the realm of HRM’s consultation methods when addressing the needs of Agricola Street.

Merchants expressed a sense that they were not being heard; that is, that during consultation sessions they made comments and suggestions that they never saw realized. Some also expressed frustration with the way the plans kept changing. One participant noted that during an initial consultation everyone seemed to agree on what they wanted and how the changes could be implemented. When the new plans came through, however, that vision they had agreed upon as a collective in the consultation session, had been entirely disregarded. Other participants described similar sentiments.

HRM staff plan consultations prepare questions, presentations, and documents in a number of formats to ensure that all participants have a chance to voice their concerns. For example, they have a question period as well as a “comment box” to give quiet or less outspoken members of the audience to share their opinions. During public consultation multiple note takers record everything said during a session. These notes are compiled, typed, and published on the HRM website. All materials are collected, comments recorded electronically, and published to the website for the public. This wealth of information only represents a small sample of interested parties. Not everyone who wants to attend a session will necessarily make it there, and not all those in attendance will leave written comments or verbally express their opinions. Nonetheless the feedback received is, in many cases, extensive. This information is read through and organized into categories and sections. In the case of the Centre Plan and the RP+5 the feedback received was inserted into large tables and organized into sections and subsections pertaining to the different parts of the plan (these tables are available online as soon as they have been reviewed by the Community Design Advisory Committee and members of HRM Planning and Infrastructure). The resulting plan that is then presented to members of the public again is a result of a series of meetings, readings of feedback, and many discussions.

Efforts to reach the public may not translate to business owners, who feel that their concerns are consistently not being addressed and fear the future implications of plans for the street. They feel that the consultation sessions should be more personalized or streamlined for business owners; two participants suggested holding private sessions for business owners alone to voice their concerns. The tension surrounding the different perceptions of what constitutes a fair venue for receiving feedback about public plans remains unresolved. Further investigation is needed to identify

more effective ways of conducting public feedback sessions so that all parties feel they are having an adequate chance to voice their concerns.

5.0 Final thoughts

The differing perspectives of the city and business owners are not actually separate from one another but, rather, speak to the stage of neighbourhood change or gentrification (Rankin, 2010) being undergone. Who benefits from neighbourhood change? As Rankin (2010) notes, an increase in property taxes in the neighbourhood being roughly on par with citywide increases suggests that Agricola Street is in the “gentrifying” stage of commercial change. This category in Rankin’s typology of the stages of commercial gentrifications means that there are “ongoing increases above the average, but not in a leading position” (Rankin, 4). That is, Agricola Street is not gentrifying rapidly but, rather, gradually. These increases are being observed, felt, and noticed by business owners and the media. Some business owners have already had to move their businesses elsewhere and business types continue to change. Currently, however, a balance between the types of businesses, a mix between old and new, and a blend of high and low-income businesses and residents remain in the area.

At first it may seem that changes are a form of improvement because a unique mix occurs; low, middle and high income tenants rub shoulders in the street and share services and space. Boutique shops exist comfortably alongside mom and pop food retailers. Consumers could purchase a \$6 coffee and a \$5 meal on the same stretch of street. This type of “improvement” is hard to classify as negative because it, arguably, adds character to a neighbourhood. The trouble is that the boutique coffee shop that sells designer cupcakes made with local ingredients might eventually be replaced with a Starbucks; the unique home furnishing shop that sells pieces made in Canada could become a chain department store selling goods imported from another continent. The very development that is touted as “neighbourhood improvement” at first, seems to attract other development that contributes to making streets and neighbourhoods homogeneous, and devoid of character. This kind of development is good for business (low cost, high earnings), but it may not be good for creating a community. While increasing business opportunities is arguably good for everyone, gentrification theorists, such as Slater, assert that those being negatively impacted by gentrification-assisted development do not have enough of a chance to contribute to the building of these new, “improved” neighbourhoods. This includes business owners who are forced to leave Agricola Street because of increasing property assessments.

While most interviewees agreed that increasing tax assessments were a burden on their businesses, not all agreed that the possibility of being forced out of the neighbourhood was a bad thing. Participant AB10 claimed:

AB10: I don't think [the effects of the Centre Plan on Agricola Street] are negative. I think they're, for the most part, positive. But they do create change for the local businesses. But I'm not saying change is bad. So even if I got squeezed out because my rent kept going up and my property tax, and I went to an industrial park, that's not necessarily bad for the neighbourhood. I'm a fan of density because it creates less urban sprawl. [...] I see density in the core area when it's mixed use as a very positive thing for the survival and thriving of the city. I see sprawl as not necessarily a positive thing. And we're seeing an awful lot of residential sprawl, and we're seeing more and more commercial sprawl now. And I think most of that is based on our development policies that exist within the downtown core.

Once more the question of who benefits from neighbourhood change is addressed. In light of these findings it is crucial to give consideration to the varying perspectives when creating policy that may inform the future of Agricola Street.

Business owners assert that their property tax assessments are increasing faster than inflation. Many saw their assessments as extravagant figures based on factors that are not necessarily accurate. While they see physical changes such as upgrades to buildings and changes in building types, and understand that this added value increases the value of surrounding properties, they feel, nonetheless, that the increases in recent years are not reflecting that change in value. Rather, the increases are seen as reflecting hyperbolic predictions of future investment in the neighbourhood due to the ship building contract, the proposed HRMbyDesign improvements, and forecasts of population growth and development density.

Many fear that the “revitalization policy” being promoted by the city will not melt seamlessly and effortlessly into the existing landscape of the neighbourhood; they fear displacement will occur and that the neighbourhood will be taken over by larger investors hoping to open homogenous chain store developments. These changes, some claim, will be forced upon business operators and they will have no choice in leaving the neighbourhood or staying—they will be pushed out.

The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the types of development that business owners fear, and the experienced effects of property tax increases for business owners and operators in the area. In addition, the expectations that merchants have for planners and HRM city officials are elucidated clearly. Namely, business owners expect staff working on the Centre Plan for Agricola Street to consult them more thoroughly and to implement the changes proposed. They believe that small businesses are a main contributor to the reputation that Agricola Street has gained over the last years as a destination street, and a hub for design and home décor.

The perceived effects of retail gentrification for business owners are complex. While business owners agree that an increase in clientele and a higher degree of more affluent clientele could be positive for their businesses, they do not necessarily see the pay-off in the future. That is, that though HRM staff may suggest that the interim effects of constructing the new development that may occur given the changed regulations will be worth it in the end, business owners do not necessarily see that pay-off happening. Some say that they will not be able to afford to stay on the street long enough to experience new growth and density. They fear that the construction, lack of parking, and increase in property taxes will drive them out long before new residents move in.

When asked about possible changes to policy that can help support businesses in the area, business owners had many suggestions. Some suggested rent caps or tax breaks for small business owners. Others recommended providing more services and infrastructure upgrades for the street to justify higher tax rates. Some participants suggested increasing social services in the area and supporting low-income populations, while others said that they are actively working to change the clientele of their businesses to a more affluent and less “at risk” populations.

The indecision, confusion, and uncertainty experienced by business owners only adds to the fear that they feel when faced with the possibility of change in the neighbourhood. The plans themselves are at issue, as is the handling of those plans by city officials, and the reaction of residents and other business owners to the plans. While some worry that they will lose their business space on the street due to increasing tax payments, others see this type of change as inevitable and do not necessarily foresee negative outcomes. Some merchants claim that gentrification has negatively impacted the neighbourhood, driving out certain types of people, and lessening the availability of certain types of services. Some note the increase in living costs in the area as well as the increase in operating costs for businesses. Conversely, certain interview participants claimed that the changes are a sign of progress and neighbourhood improvement. They credit themselves and

other merchants for changing the face of business on the street, and ushering in a new era of high-end retail that caters to a wider variety of people from different parts of the city. Some business owners have made the street a destination: a cultural and artistic hub for creative individuals to buy local products, cheap lunches, high-end furniture, and fair trade coffee.

Gentrification theorists suggest that the act of making an area more welcoming to one portion of the population—that is, the more affluent, creative, young group of people living in urban settings and boosting up that “symbolic economy” described by Zukin—disregards the existing population to greater and greater degrees until they are finally displaced. As Peck suggests, the class of people moving into inner-city neighbourhoods have certain demands to support their lifestyles and working-class members of society accommodate those demands. This becomes problematic, for Peck, when the factions of society supporting the incoming class are seen as “taking the back seat” in their own neighbourhoods, and where their future is being “driven” or shaped by a highly mobile class of people. This tension has yet to be resolved on Agricola Street, as in many other neighbourhoods across the country.

6.0 Appendix

Appendix A: Semi-structured Questions for Business Owners

How long have you been operating a business on Agricola Street?
How have conditions for the business changed over that time?
What kinds of changes have you noticed in the business types on Agricola Street over the last few years?
To what extent have you experienced any changes in the costs of doing business here?
To what extent has your clientele changed over the years?
To what extent do your customers come from the neighbourhood or beyond?
What do you see happening to the costs of living in this area?
How are changes in the neighbourhood affecting your business?
What kinds of effects have HRM's plans for the Capital District had on the neighbourhood?
How do you think HRM's plans to increase density in the area may affect businesses on Agricola Street?
What kind of planning policy could support businesses like yours on Agricola Street?

Appendix B: Consent Letter

Project Title: **The effects of neighbourhood change for business owners on Agricola Street**
Principal Investigator: **Delaine Tiniakos-Doran, MPLAN Candidate**

Dear Study Participant:

I **invite you** to take part in a research study at Dalhousie University. Taking part in the study is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time. The information you provide will be used solely for research purposes. This letter explains what you will be asked to do, and any risk or inconvenience you may experience. Participating in the study may not benefit you directly, but we hope to learn things which will improve understanding of your neighbourhood. Please feel free to discuss any questions you have with me, Delaine Tiniakos-Doran. If you agree to participate, please sign the form at the bottom and return it to me at the address listed here.

The **purpose of the study** is to understand the nature of changes occurring to businesses and business owners on Agricola Street in Halifax. Given the nature of the transition currently occurring in the North End of Halifax, the study assumes that Agricola Street is experiencing gentrification: that is, a process of social and spatial change which displaces lower income residents and the businesses they support as higher income residents and higher end businesses move in.

For this research I am arranging **in-person interviews** with business owners on Agricola Street. I will conduct the interview which I expect will take about 20 to 30 minutes; it will consist of semi-structured questions about your experience and opinions. (I have attached an outline of the question topics we will discuss.) If you agree, I will tape record the interview; alternatively I can take notes. You may refuse to answer any question, or end the interview at any point. (If you decide to withdraw from the study, I will destroy any data you contributed.)

I recognize that participating in this study may cause you some **inconvenience**, but I will try to minimize that by visiting at a time and place convenient for you. I will try to limit the **risk** that anyone reading the results of the research can identify you from your comments. In publications, we will not use any identifying information other than your type of business (for example, "retail" or "restaurant").

We will keep your remarks **confidential**. I will never reveal your identity. We will maintain our interview notes and any analysis based on them in a secure location. Only myself and my project supervisor (Dr Jill Grant at Dalhousie University) will have access. Dalhousie University policy requires that data be stored securely. We will retain the data for long-term study of development trends.

I am happy to share the results of the research with you, as I hope that you may find **benefit** in knowing more about the topic. (Should any new information arise which may affect your decision to participate in the study, I will let you know immediately.)

In the event that you have any difficulties with, or wish to voice concern about, any aspect of your participation in this study, you may contact the Human Research Ethics Integrity Coordinator at Dalhousie University's Office of Human Research Ethics and Integrity for assistance. (902-494-1462, Catherine.Connors@dal.ca . If you agree to participate, please sign the consent form attached, and check the boxes to signal your preferences. Thank you for considering my request.

Sincerely yours,

Delaine Tiniakos-Doran,
MPLAN Candidate

Date

Contact information:

Research supervisor: Dr Jill Grant

PLEASE READ AND SIGN IF YOU AGREE: Consent form

I have read the description of the project and agree to participate as set out in this form. I understand that I may refuse to answer any question and that I may withdraw from the study at any time.

Name

Signature

Date

I agree that you may record my remarks for transcription:

[] Signature or initials: _____

I agree that you may use brief quotes from my remarks:

[] Signature or initials: _____

I agree to be contacted for additional information during the course of the study, should that prove necessary.

[] Signature or initials: _____

I would like to be informed of the preliminary results of the research:

[] Mailing address: _____

Email:

Keep one copy of this form for your records, and **return a signed copy** to:

Delaine Tiniakos-Doran
Dalhousie University, School of Planning

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