



Halifax Regional Municipality, NS an overview of development trends

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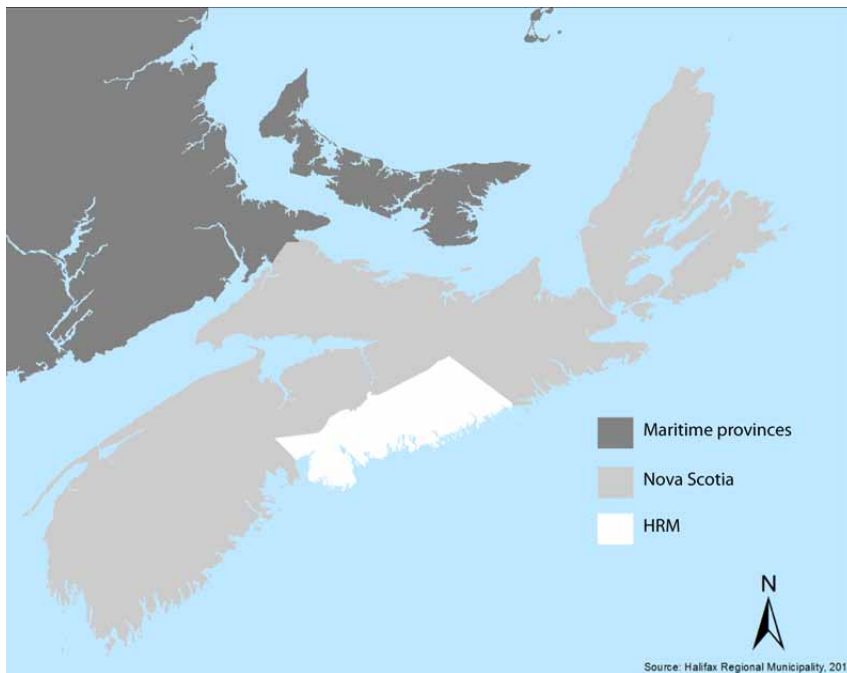
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Halifax Regional Municipality, Nova Scotia: An Overview of Development Trends

Introduction

The Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) is located on the Atlantic coast of Nova Scotia, Canada, and features a deep natural harbour where “water depths throughout most of the harbour are greater than 20 m, providing easy access for large vessels” (Natural Resources Canada, 2007: online). The original city of Halifax was established in 1749 for military purposes, taking advantage of the harbour (Millward, 2002).



Map 1: Location of HRM in Nova Scotia (Map source: J. Critchley, 2011; Data source: HRM, 2011)



The Suburbs Project at Dalhousie University involves long-term research investigating development trends in Canadian suburbs. Several Canadian cities were examined previously. In the summer of 2011, interviews were conducted with planners, elected officials, developers and residents in the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM), Nova Scotia. During field visits, the researcher made visual observations of current development trends. This report presents the preliminary results of this research for HRM.

Research findings are available at:
<http://theoryandpractice.planning.dal.ca/index.html>

Figure 1: Aerial view of Halifax Harbour (Source: Natural Resources Canada, 2007, www.nrcan.gc.ca/halifax/index-eng.php)



Map 2: Map of the Town of Halifax in 1749 (Source: Gentleman's Magazine, October 1749, Volume 19, Page 440, www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/ilej/image1.pl?item=page&seq=8&size=1&id=gm.1749.10.x.19.x.x.440)

The municipality covers a land area of approximately 5,500 square kilometres. With a population of 372,858, HRM accounts for 41% of the total population of Nova Scotia (Statistics Canada, 2006). "Halifax Regional Municipality was created in April 1996 as a result of the amalgamation of the cities of Halifax and Dartmouth, the town of Bedford and the municipality of the County of Halifax" (HRM, 2010: online). It comprises various landscapes, from agricultural and forested areas to a built-up urban core (HRM, 2010).

"Within Nova Scotia and the broader Atlantic regional economy, HRM has traditionally shown a strong economic performance, and conditions are set to continue to create relatively more employment than the rest of Atlantic Canada over the next 25 years" (HRM, 2006: 7). HRM is growing faster than other areas in Nova Scotia, and the highest growth in HRM took place in the suburban and rural commuter shed areas, doubling in population between 1971 and 2001 (HRM, 2010).

Development History

Development patterns in the Halifax area have not followed typical development patterns, largely because of topographic constraints and policy direction. Rapid residential expansion of areas within commuting distance to the urban core began in the 1960s due to a combination of undeveloped peripheral areas not suited to resource-based industries, low land prices and increased use of automobiles (Millward, 2002).

The challenging surficial geology in this region led development to be encouraged in the suburban communities of Cole Harbour and Lower Sackville in the 1960s (Millward, 2006). The Halifax Region Housing Survey, known as the 'Coblentz Report', in 1963 and the Regional Development Plan (RDP) in 1975 continued to support development in those areas. The RDP added the communities of Eastern Passage and Bedford as development sites, with all four communities served by central sewer and water (Millward, 2002 and 2006). The Regional Development Plan called for a development boundary that was not ultimately enforced. "The central portion of the Halifax region has been strongly shaped by the RDP over a period of 30 years, and its legacy is still embedded in current planning strategies (municipal plans) and land use by-laws (zoning codes)" (Millward, 2002: 39).

Efforts to coordinate regional planning through the Metropolitan Area Planning Commission were discontinued in the 1980s but the amalgamated HRM began regional planning in 2001 (Millward, 2002). The Regional Municipal Planning Strategy (Regional Plan) was endorsed by HRM Council in August 2006.

...with little agricultural capability, extremely low land costs, and minimal planning controls, the peripheral commuter belt of Halifax-Dartmouth has experienced considerable suburban and exurban development over the last 40 years, in response to rising car-ownership and improved roads.

Millward (2002: 45)



Figure 2: Sewer and Water Trenches, Burton's Hill, Portland Street, Dartmouth, Looking East, ca. 1900 (Nova Scotia Archives, www.gov.ns.ca/nsarm/virtual/halifax/archives.asp?ID=119)



Figure 4: Hydrostone homes built (1921) following the Halifax Explosion (Nova Scotia Archives, www.gov.ns.ca/nsarm/virtual/explosion/archives.asp?ID=137)



Figure 3: Campbell Road (later Barrington Street) looking north from Rector Street after the Halifax Explosion (Nova Scotia Archives, www.gov.ns.ca/nsarm/virtual/explosion/archives.asp?ID=14)

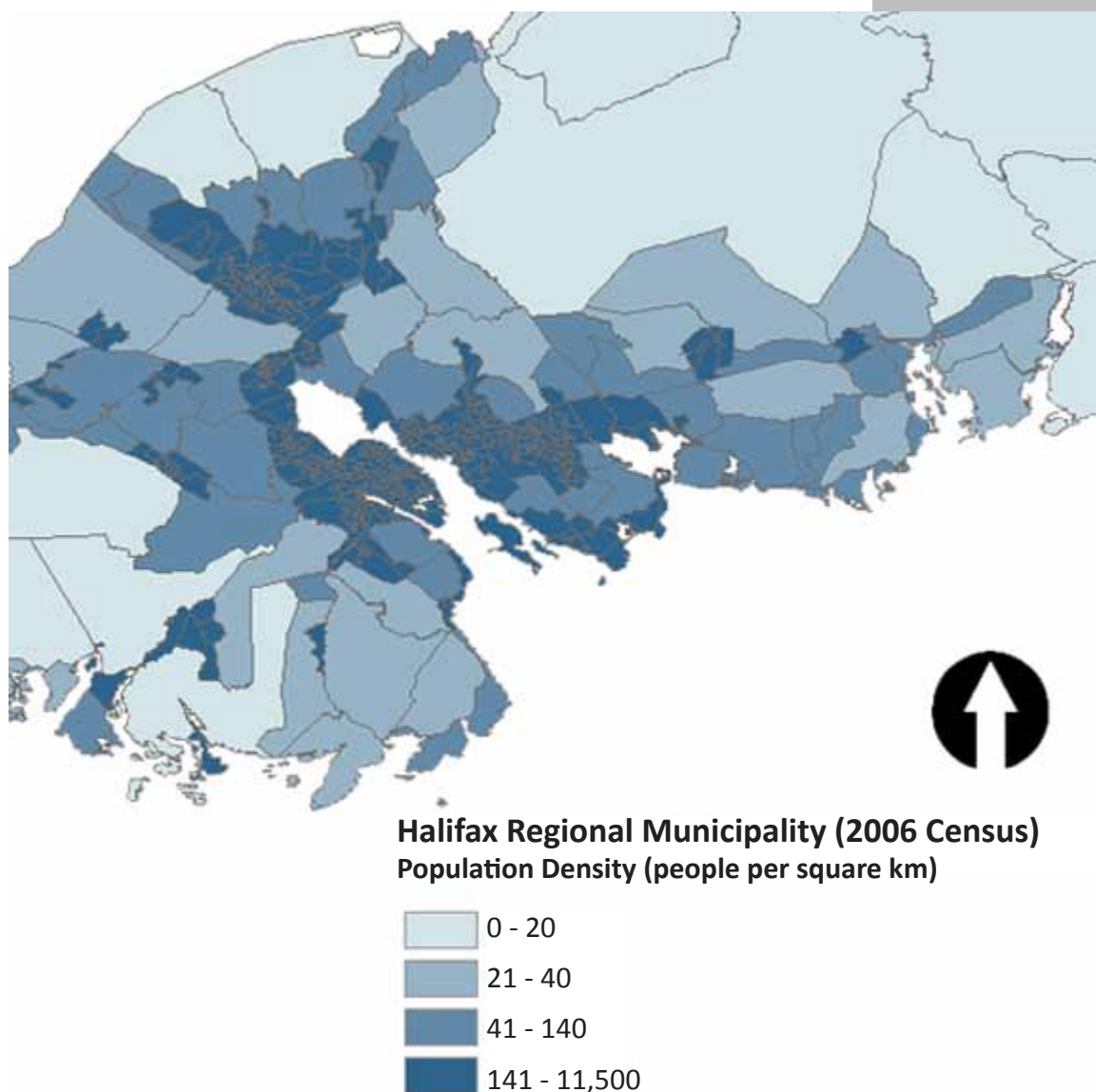


Figure 5: Motorcade inaugurating service on Halifax-Dartmouth [Angus L. Madonald] Bridge, April, 1955 (Nova Scotia Archives, www.gov.ns.ca/nsarm/virtual/halifax/archives.asp?ID=124)

Census Snapshot

As of 2006, HRM's population was 372,858, an increase of 3.3% since the 2001 census (2006 Census). In 2010, HRM's population was estimated to have reached 403,188 persons (Greater Halifax Partnership, 2011).

The overall population density in 2001 was estimated to be 65.5 people per square kilometre (Nova Scotia Community Counts, 2011). There are significant variations in density across the municipality, as demonstrated in the map below. Most areas within the urban core of HRM had a population density ranging between 140 to 11,500 people per square km. Population densities are lower in areas outside of the urban core (Service Nova Scotia, 2011).



Map 3: HRM (2011). GIS Data, HRM, DTM NAD 83

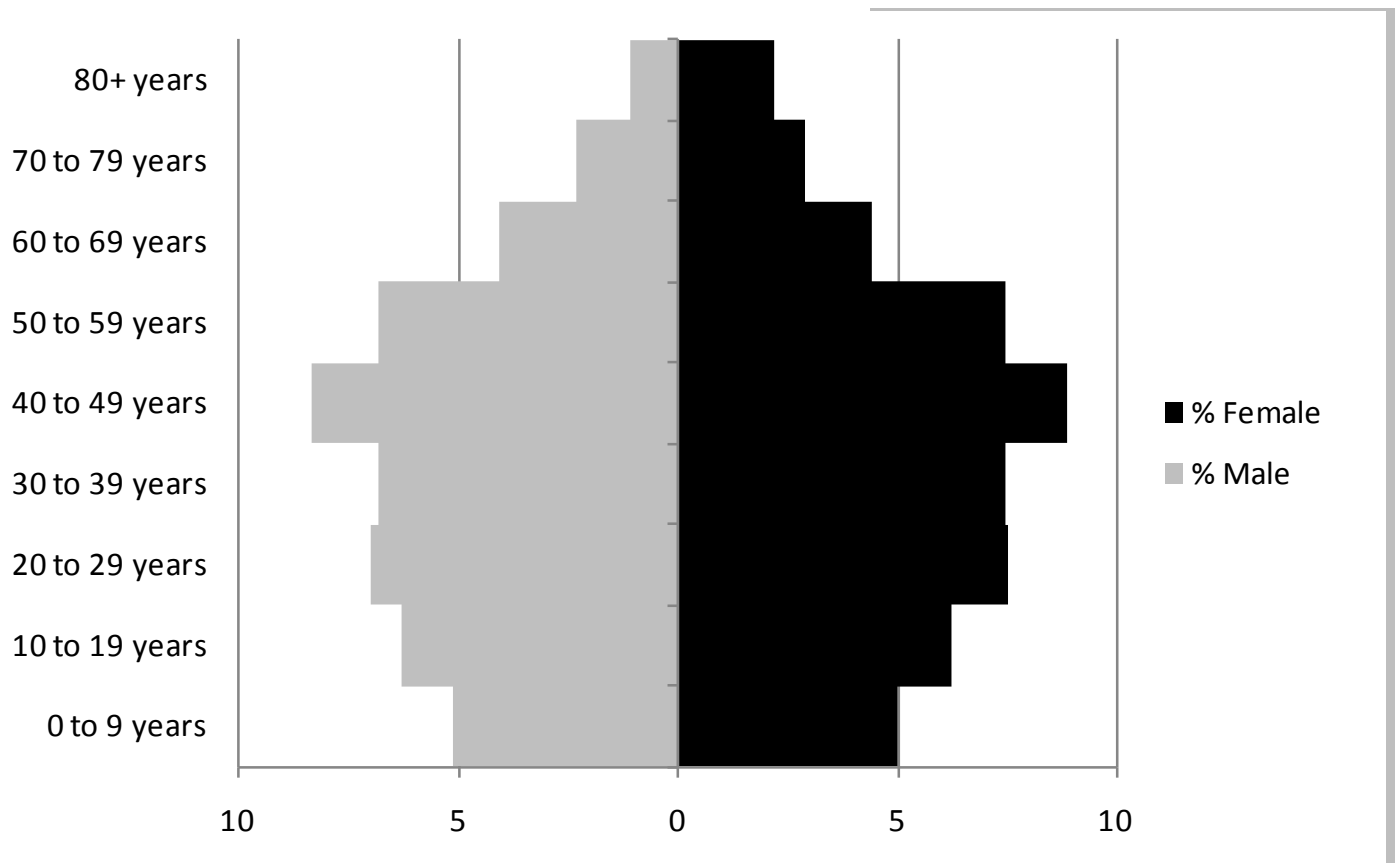


Figure 6: HRM Population Distribution, 2006
(Source: Statistics Canada, Census 2006)

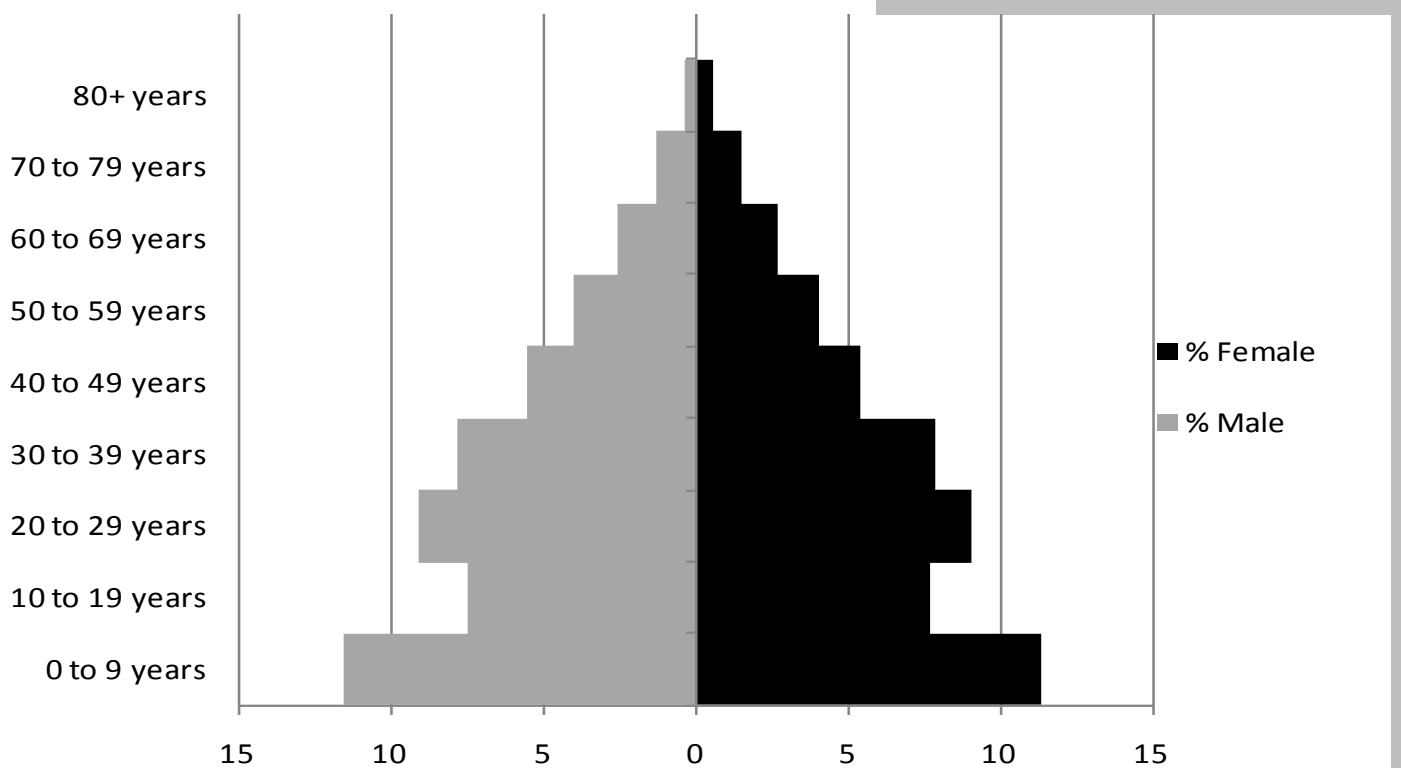


Figure 7: Halifax Census Subdivision/County
Population Distribution, 1951 (Source:
Statistics Canada, Census 1951)

In 2006, the largest age cohort of residents in HRM was between 40 and 49 years old (Census 2006); the median age of the population was 39 (Source: 2006 Community Profiles, Statistics Canada, 2010). In contrast, the largest age cohort of residents in 1951 was children aged 0 to 9 (1951 Census). The overall population of Halifax increased from 162,217 residents in 1951 to 372,858 residents as of 2006 (1951 & 2006 Census). In recent years, “the subarea with the greatest absolute change between 1996 and 2001 is the Suburban subarea with an actual population increase of 8,200 people” (HRM, 2004: 1).

The trend in recent decades has been residents leaving the urban core and moving into the suburban areas surrounding the core. According to census data, close to equal numbers of residents were living in either the regional centre or suburbs in 1971 (HRM, 2006). As of 2001, the disparity between these two residential locations was significant, with a larger number of residents living in suburban areas than other locations such as regional centre, and rural and commutershed areas (HRM, 2006).

Household sizes in HRM are small, with 64% of households comprising 1 or 2 people. The average number of persons in households in 2006 was 2.4 (2006 Census), considerably lower than the average in 1951 of 4.2 persons per household (1951 Census). The 2006 average of 2.4 persons in private households was on par with the Nova Scotian (2.4) and Canadian averages (2.5) (Community Profiles, 2006; Statistics Canada, 2010).

Income levels in HRM are low, with 68% of individuals earning below \$40,000 annually. In 2006, the median income of individuals 15 years of age and over was \$27,193, with the average income being \$35,031 (2006 Census). While HRM income levels are low, the median income is slightly higher than the Canadian average of \$25,615 (Statistics Canada, 2007). The two largest income categories - individuals with an annual income of less than \$10,000 (20% of HRM population) and individuals with an annual income of between \$10,000 and \$19,999 (19% of population) - represent 39% of the total earning population (2006 Census).

The primary mode of transportation to work in HRM is as the driver of a private automobile, at 65% of commuters (2006 Census). Place of residence greatly impacts the mode of travel to work, as demonstrated in the charts below. The most prominent mode of transportation to work for suburban residents is as the driver of a vehicle (67%), where the residents in the urban core travel actively by walking or cycling (44%) (Statistics Canada, 2001 Journey-to-Work Data, and HRM Planning Services (2004)).

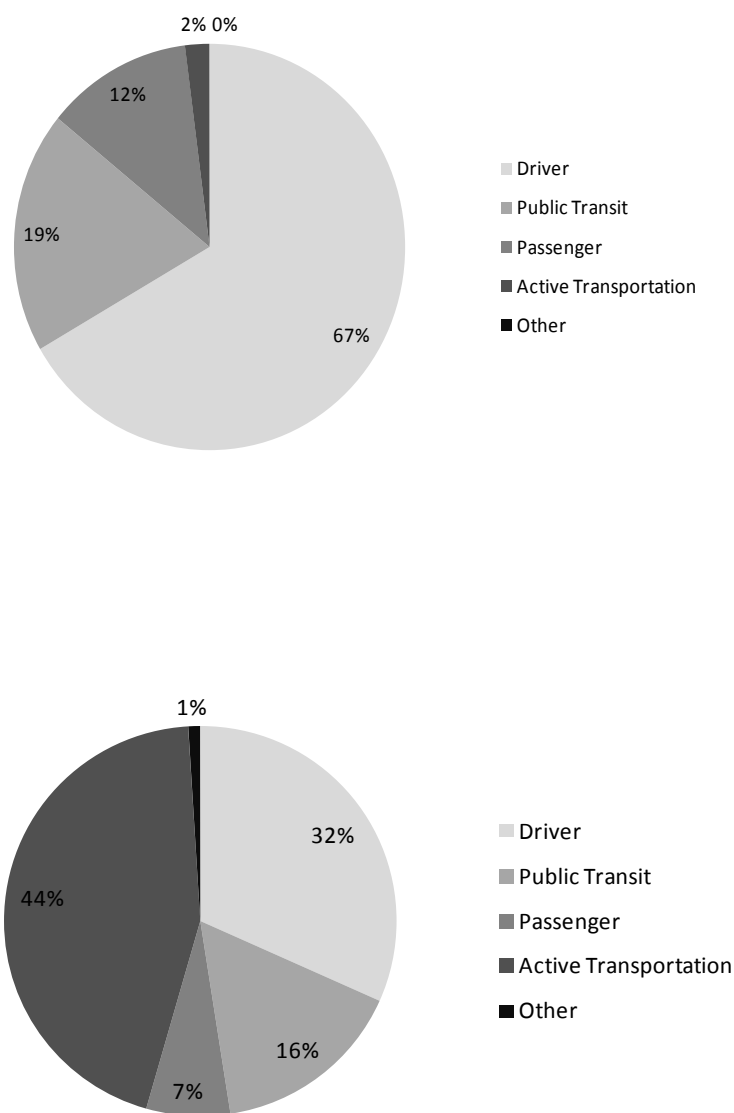


Figure 8:
Suburban areas
transportation
to work
(Statistics
Canada, 2001
Journey-to-Work
Data, and HRM
Planning
Services, 2004)

Figure 9: Urban
areas
transportation
to work
(Statistics
Canada, 2001
Journey-to-
Work Data, and
HRM Planning
Services, 2004)

The median monthly cost of rent in HRM in 2006 was \$712, which exceeds the Canadian average of \$671. The average value of owned dwellings (\$212,942) in HRM is below the Canadian average of \$263,369, but above the Nova Scotia average of \$158,000 (Source: 2006 Community Profiles, Statistics Canada, 2010). The majority of homes were owned in HRM in 2006, with 64% of homes owned. Housing tenure rates differed significantly between urban and suburban sub-areas. In the suburban sub-area in 2001, 65% of residents owned their home, as compared to 37% of urban residents (2001 Census, as noted by HRM, 2004).

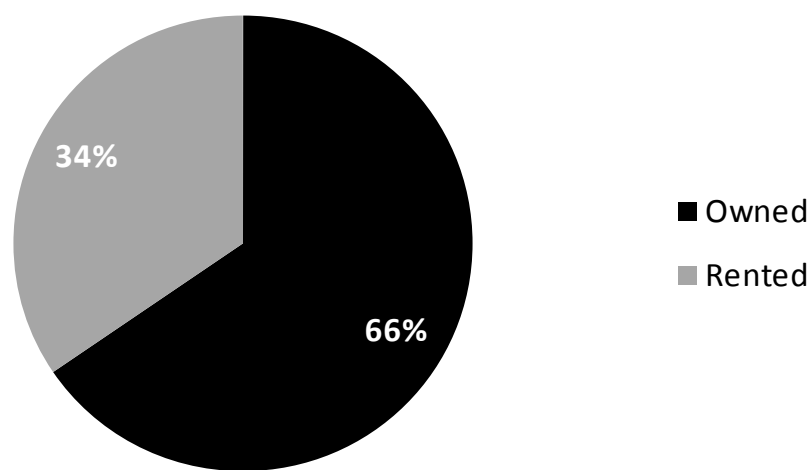


Figure 10: Suburban housing tenure, 2001 (Source: 2001 Census, as noted by HRM, 2004)

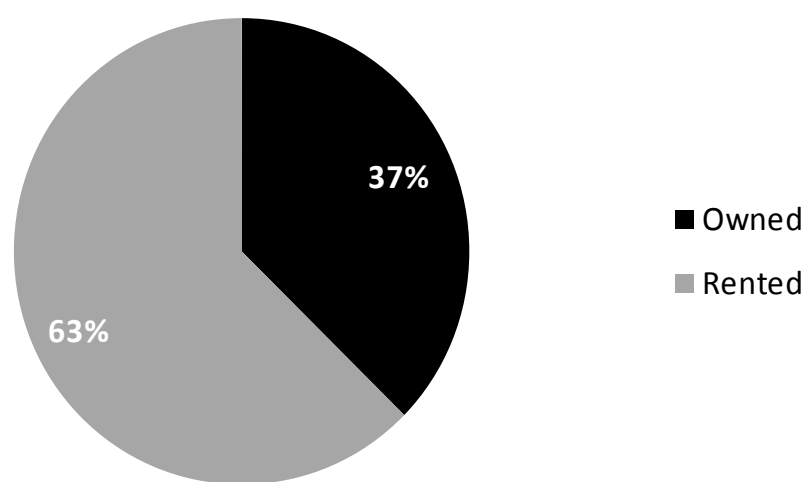


Figure 11: Urban housing tenure, 2001 (Source: 2001 Census, as noted by HRM, 2004)

Planning Structure

In terms of land use regulation in Nova Scotia, the Municipal Government Act (MGA) outlines the provincial legislative mandate and enables municipal land use planning (Halifax Regional Municipality, 2006). The MGA establishes planning and development procedures for municipalities and sets provincial standards for planning tools such as planning strategies, by-laws, development agreements, and comprehensive development districts, ensuring that procedures are consistent province-wide (Province of Nova Scotia, 1998).

HRM's Regional Municipal Planning Strategy (Regional Plan) outlines the municipality's approach to land use (Halifax Regional Municipality, 2006). The Regional Plan was approved in 2006 and provides a twenty-five year planning horizon. The first review of the Plan is taking place this year, as per the established five-year review cycle.

The Regional Plan contains an overall vision, principles, and goals that provide the framework for the subsequent policy statements. It emphasizes the need for managing growth in the municipality, to ensure financial and environmental resources are preserved (Halifax Regional Municipality, 2006). The Regional Plan identifies six areas for future growth in HRM - Bedford South, Morris-Russell Lake, Bedford West, Port Wallis, Sandy Lake, and Highway 102 west corridor adjacent to Blue Mountain - Birch Cove Lakes Park (HRM, 2006).



Figure 12: Example of a private condominium townhouse community in Eastern Passage, HRM

HRM's vision for the future is to maintain and enhance our quality of life by fostering the growth of healthy and vibrant communities, a strong and diverse economy, and sustainable environment

Halifax Regional Municipality, 2006



Figure 13: Example of an estate single detached home in the Kingswood subdivision, HRM

Results of Field Research

The following summary notes trends mentioned during field research. The research methods include one-on-one interviews, field site visits to suburban developments, and review of municipal planning documents and real estate promotional materials. Interviewees were drawn from a sample of residents, developers, planners (municipal and private planners, development officers) and councillors. All interviews were conducted between June 8 and July 27, 2011. Interviews were recorded and transcribed with participant consent. In total, 25 interviews took place with a sample of 26 individuals (12 women and 14 men).

Defining the 'Suburbs'

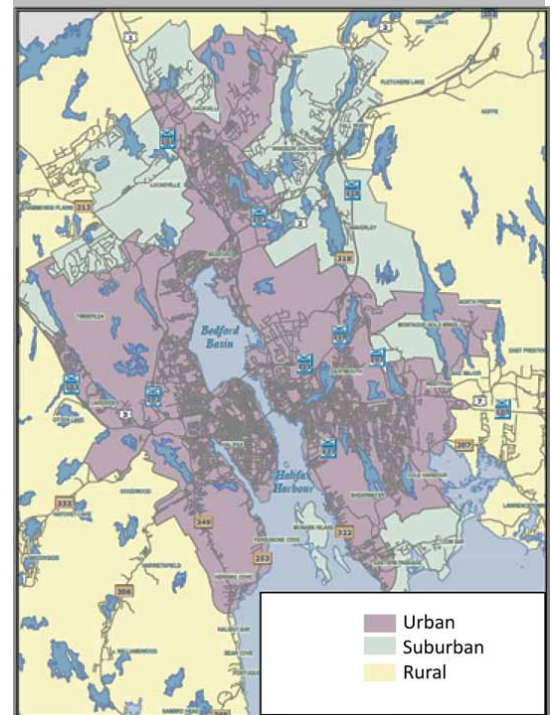
The definition of what areas are 'suburban' within HRM is far from settled as respondents varied in their definition. Several respondents considered those areas outside the core that are serviced (i.e., municipal sewer and water) as suburban and un-serviced (i.e., on-site septic and wells) as rural. One councillor suggested that this definition aligns with the Regional Plan (see Map 7), with suburban areas beginning just outside of the urban core (former cities of Halifax and Dartmouth). However, the councillor also noted that the municipality's 'taxation model' considers all serviced areas as 'urban', even those outside of the urban core (see Map 8). One developer challenged the Regional Plan definition of suburbs stating that the former edges of the 'inner city' have receded further from the urban core (former cities of Halifax and Dartmouth). This characterization aligns with the taxation model.



Map 5: Map of settlement areas in HRM (HRM, 2010, www.halifax.ca/regionalplanning/Images/HRMmaplg.jpg)



Figure 14: Images used in promotional materials for The Parks of West Bedford, HRM (Source: West Bedford Holdings Limited, www.theparksofwestbedford.ca/its-all-here.php)



Map 4: Tax structure of HRM (Source: HRM, 2010)

Council Structure

The current dynamics of the municipal council was raised by several respondents. According to some respondents, the amalgamated municipality has created a situation in which urban, suburban and rural areas all need to be considered and decisions must balance the, at times, competing interests.

As of 2011, council consisted of 23 councillors representing urban, suburban and rural areas, and a mayor. The Nova Scotia Utility and Review Board made a decision in July 2011 to reduce the number of districts and subsequently the size of council to 16 councillors plus a mayor. The impact a smaller council will have on the council dynamic will be seen in the coming years.

Respondents appreciated the challenging position that elected officials face in weighing competing interests. One planner spoke of the difficult position that councillors have in balancing expectations of staff and residents. Planners acknowledged the role they need to play in public education.

Now with this amalgamated format and this political thing, of people wading between rural and suburban and city, the decisions that are coming, they're always meant to be balanced, and "oh, we can't upset the suburban area or the rural area so we better give them transit, we better give them this". And all the while, we've not protected the downtown.

Developer

So the big challenge is getting that education out there. And it's easy for us as planners because we're in it all the time but what we don't realize is... Well, we do realize and we need to recognize, is our elected officials, they're not just dealing with planning, they're dealing with recreation, they're dealing with tax financing, they're dealing with solid waste, they're dealing with sea level rise. They've got a lot on their plate. And it's our job, and I always say this to people, it's our job to make those tough decisions easy. And if we don't, then we failed.

Planner

Suburban Neighbourhood Characteristics

Several new trends are appearing in suburban areas of HRM.

Mixed use

New master planned communities are featuring a mix of uses and integrating elements of contemporary planning philosophies, such as recreation facilities that link areas and are co-located with other services (e.g., schools). The inclusion of commercial uses and even business campuses for residents to be able to work in close proximity to their suburban homes are a new element of master planned suburban developments. An example of this co-location is the Research in Motion office within the Parks of West Bedford development (see Figure 18). The recent master planned communities which are identified as growth areas in the Regional Plan (i.e., Bedford South, Morris-Russell Lake, Bedford West), have been developed through development agreements. Development Agreements provide flexibility to municipal officials to negotiate features they wish to see within the suburbs.



I know when Bedford South was approved, I had a woman call me up. She and her husband were retired, and they were moving into a condominium there. And she said, "Will there be commercial development in the community?" And I was used to the old thinking, that 'keep it away from me'. And she wanted assurances that there was going to be a grocery store in there. They didn't want to have to drive a long way. So I do think demographics is affecting our development a lot.

Planner

Figure 15: Commercial/Business campuses



Housing options

Various housing types are being incorporated in new suburban developments. Housing options include townhouses, bungalow townhouse condos, apartments/multi-unit dwellings, semi-detached and single-detached homes. These bring affordability, diversity and vibrancy to the suburbs. Respondents spoke of the large size of single detached homes now being built.



Figure 17: Single detached homes



Figure 19: Semi detached homes

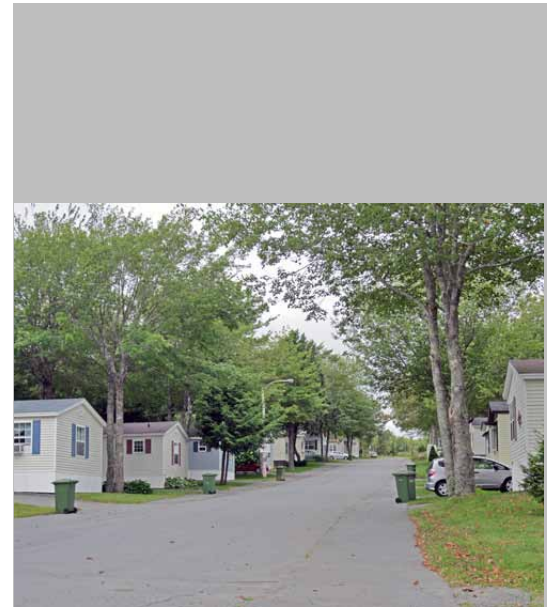


Figure 16: Mobile homes



Figure 18: Single storey townhouse bungalows



Figure 20: Apartment/multi-unit buildings

Planning for transit

Transit is now part of the planning in new master planned communities. Bus stops are being added early on in new developments, allowing transit to be an option for residents. However, some thought that transit is not servicing suburban developments well.

Use of parkland

While not exclusive to suburban developments, the use of parkland dedication requirements was mentioned by many planners as having shifted to a more comprehensive approach in recent years. Dedicated parkland must be usable land, not simply buffer or wetland areas. Developers use parks as a marketing feature. Parks are being created from the outset of developments, rather than in later stages. Residents spoke of the availability of playgrounds, an important feature for young families.

Trail systems and forested areas

Trail networks are being incorporated in new suburban developments. An effort is being made to preserve some of the existing forested areas, instead of clearing the land completely when developing it.

You know, we were always good at providing for parkland but now... we've really started to get teeth on connecting smaller trails to larger networks, the larger networks connecting through major communities. You know, the Rails to Trails program has really aided that because we have ... a built piece of environment that we have available now that links all of our communities. So, you know, when that light bulb moment happened probably fifteen or twenty years ago, now you're starting to see the infrastructure get laid and people being able to use them.

Planner



Figure 21: Trails



Influence of Contemporary Planning Philosophies

Contemporary planning philosophies, such as new urbanism and smart growth, that promote walkable communities with a mix of uses, are being incorporated into HRM policy but have seen limited implementation. Several reasons can point to why the application of these approaches has been limited. Respondents described the risk that developers took in being the first to test a new approach. Many noted that developers and builders often resorted to 'cookie cutter' development forms as there is financial certainty in proven, previously-tested models.

One respondent noted that developers are driven by market demand, so that influences what they're proposing to build more so than contemporary planning philosophies. Also, many areas of the municipality have outdated secondary planning strategies and land-use bylaws that do not reflect these newer approaches. Some respondents spoke of the challenge presented by inflexible engineering standards in testing new approaches, or the lack of infrastructure such as bike lanes and end of trip facilities that support residents to choose active modes of travel. One developer spoke of frustration in trying to work with HRM to implement new and innovative concepts. Cost is also a deterrent for implementation of these planning concepts.

Aspects of contemporary planning approaches are being applied to the new master planned communities. This can be explained by the negotiating ability the development agreement process provides, as mentioned earlier, and the easier acceptance of the public to new developments rather than re-developing existing areas.

... most things in life seem to be cyclical. They kind of come around in a trend. And there always seems to be this need for a bit of a tipping point to send the cycle ... back to where it was before.

... I think it's important for these concepts to continue to be ... pushed forward and examined and applied where appropriate. And each one of them, when they're applied where appropriate, will provide a nice test case to demonstrate to the market, to developers, to everybody who before had a different idea of the suburbs, to kind of get them thinking about the suburbs and ... urban/suburban development in a bit of a different way. So I think it's important that these ideas keep at the forefront of planning. And as long as they're looked at in the appropriate context, I think that they're going to continue to be very important.

Planner

Benefits people see to developments that follow these principles include less pressure on infrastructure, better levels of service at a more affordable cost, affordability, a more vibrant downtown core, vitality, walkability, the ability for family members to live close to one another, and the ability for residents to age in place.

Neighbourhoods and developments that respondents suggest are good examples of smart growth, new urbanist, or sustainable, healthy communities include the Hydrostone, Bishop's Landing, King's Wharf, and Westmount. The existing site of Penhorn Mall is being re-developed and many spoke of the potential for it to demonstrate these principles. In the suburbs, communities such as Voyageur Lakes, The Ravines of Bedford South, Morris Lake Estates, Russell Lake West and the Parks of West Bedford were mentioned as featuring elements of these philosophies.



Figure 22: Site Plan of King's Wharf development (Source: Fares Real Estate Inc, 2009, www.kingswharf.ca/index.php/location)

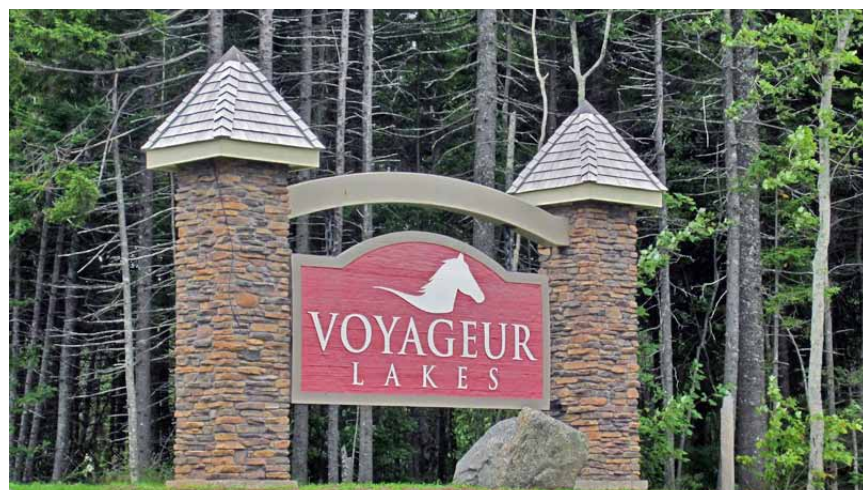


Figure 23: Voyageur Lakes, located off of Hammonds Plains Road

I think the problem with implementing a lot of this is figuring out how to 1) make a market be interested in that. So that's the problem for a developer, is how do you know if the market's going to buy into it? The first one in is always risky. Right? It's really, really, risky. And 2) these new approaches... You know, the problem with planners is [they] actually don't get to be in charge at a municipal level. It's the engineers. Right?... And it makes it very difficult with the Red Book [of engineering standards], which is sort of a hard and fast approach to doing things...

And it's very expensive to build. I mean developers invest a tremendous amount of money upfront, often in a regulatory process that takes years to get through, years. And then all of a sudden you get to the end and you build it, and you don't know if it's going to sell or not. So the upfront uncertainty is very difficult to deal with. So it's very hard to move towards some of these more innovative concepts...

Developer

Resident Preferences

Respondents stressed that not everyone wants to live downtown in an urban setting. For many, the suburban environment continues to be aspired to and desired. Frustration was voiced by some respondents that planners and modern planning practices may be going too far in terms of promoting density and urban environments.

In new suburban areas, residents are looking for good design of the public realm that includes green space, sidewalks, trails, parks, and amenities (i.e., commercial services, access to transit). Newer homes with more personal space in the form of larger lots are desired by residents living in the suburbs. Schools are top of mind for young families moving to new suburban areas. Residents want good quality schools that are centrally located within their community. Residents also want a sense of community, and safety, in terms of traffic and crime, is another feature that residents look for in choosing new suburban areas. Many are moving to the suburbs seeking more affordable housing.



Figure 24: Distances between homes are minimal in some newly developing communities

I think one of the big challenges is that people don't want to all live in the city... Everybody, like I said, can't live in a box in the sky. You know, some people actually want to live in a home on a property that they can afford.

Planner

... a lot of modern planning, what is regarded as best practices in planning today, in some ways is designed to kill the goose that laid the golden egg. And I just mean that Canadian suburbs actually work pretty darn well. We don't have the excessively low densities of American suburbs. We do have good functioning transit systems in the suburbs. Modern planning is pushing up densities, is making for more transit-oriented development, and those are good things. But don't go so far that you put people off from the suburbs, you know, and you destroy the quality of life that our suburbs have. Because there is really good quality of life in our suburbs.

Resident

Sustainable communities

Some respondents questioned whether residents actually wanted sustainable communities. They spoke of the acceptance of micro-level changes (e.g., use of rainwater barrels) but questioned whether macro-level changes (e.g., density) would be accepted by many. One councillor highlighted the changes that have taken place over several decades in which value systems have changed, with sustainability at the forefront now.

Key Concerns for the Future of Suburbs

Transportation and affordability of housing in HRM are consistently cited as the key concerns for the future of Canadian suburbs.

Transportation

Downtown Halifax is located on a peninsula that relies primarily on bus transit and private vehicles for access. Many suburban developments located far from the urban core are situated on two lane roads, with many areas relying on the same highways to access key work locations such as downtown Halifax, Bayers Lake Business Park, and Burnside Park. Respondents talked about the high number of suburban residents using private vehicles as means of transportation around the municipality. At the same time, some respondents spoke negatively about public transit in terms of convenience, comfort, and in one case, safety. Some expressed willingness to use rail or a ferry, but would not consider using the bus.

I don't think anybody really wants them [referring to sustainable communities]... So it's at the micro-scale, they might be interested in making sure that their windows don't leak as much or that theirs is an R-2000 home. But planners are concerned about sustainability at the macro level. So how does community 'A' relate to community 'B', and how much driving time does it take, and how much asphalt has to be put down, and can they get there by bike, and can you cross the road?

I'm not sure in this country yet that there is a broad-based understanding of what sustainable community, sustainable planning, land-use planning is... Those kind of fundamental thinkings, I don't think have permeated the Canadian consciousness... And private developers have to...our job is to sell what the market wants. And we have a waiting list for large rural subdivisions that are near the city, you know, within commuting distance to the city.

Developer

Affordability

Development costs continue to increase and those costs are transferred to homeowners. Even with the introduction of various housing options in the suburbs, entry units such as townhomes are still in the \$250,000 to \$300,000 range. Respondents expressed concern that due to the high cost of housing and low interest rates, some homeowners are likely 'house poor'. Others mentioned concern about the impact rising gas prices will have on suburban residents. On the flip side, some respondents predicted that suburban property values may decrease, as the population ages and the price of gas increases. So the short-term may be unaffordable in the suburbs, but homes in outlying areas may see a de-valuing in the long-term, according to some.

Affordability is not only a concern for suburban areas. Some respondents expressed concern about the lack of affordability in the urban core. Affordable housing options for residents with lower incomes are a concern for HRM overall. Many spoke to the lack of incentives that planning has built into policy, which could encourage developers to provide affordable options.

I think the benefits to the rural development are really just that people have an option to buy a more affordable home. And when I say affordable, we were laughing about this the other day because now they're coming in [at] a quarter [of] a million [dollars] to be affordable.

Planner

We're building a built environment for the highest players pretty much across the board and leaving the responsibility for providing for those less fortunate to the government. Which is great but it's not working really well. And I think that we need to take a little more responsibility and require certain things. Like we've caught on that we need to require green space within a subdivision. Why are we not catching on that we need to require something that's more affordable within that community as well?

Planner

Increasing Density

Increasing density in existing developments, in a manner acceptable to current residents, is a challenge on the near horizon. Small scale density measures such as granny suites and auxiliary dwelling units could be a good middle ground, as they are relatively inconspicuous. Planners considered achieving higher densities in new suburban developments to also be a challenge. One planner felt that good quality design would lessen the public's resistance to density.

Downtown's Empty Lots

Even with the subject at hand being the suburbs, respondents clearly drew links between suburban and urban development. Several empty lots exist in the downtown core of Halifax, with approved permits and no buildings being constructed. Opinions differed among respondents to explain the situation. Some felt that the global economic downturn may have impacted developers, while others thought buildings were not being developed as the leasing market for office space was so weak, or that policies did not push enough for downtown development. Others suggested that the municipality put up barriers to developers with lengthy approval processes.

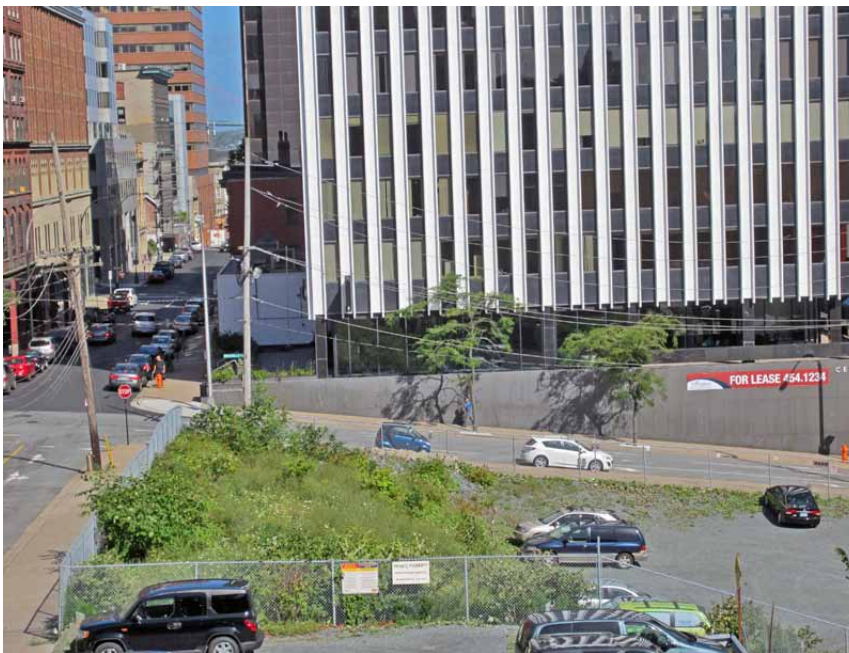


Figure 25: Empty lot in the downtown core of Halifax

And I think if planners started there, if that's where we started - this is the wage of the average Nova Scotian, this is what they can afford to pay for housing, this is how much it costs to build a street to this standard, like how much can they afford to put into the house? How much house do we want them to be able to have? Or do they need if they're going to raise a kid? Then we could actually back into a budget that we could say this is how much money that can be spent on infrastructure, and so this is what we should ask the development community to build.

We could back into that starting with the wage. And we know what that wage is. And it would totally change how we looked at things because the wage is half what it is in Calgary and we'd stop looking across Canada then. It's a third of what it is in Vancouver. And we'd stop saying, "oh, isn't Vancouver great, let's implement that policy, that was great policy, let's apply it." It's like, well, no, because a single woman raising her kids in Nova Scotia can't do that. And it's not fair to say the development community is being, you know, mean, bad or wrong because they just can't sell it because she can't afford it.

Planner

Potential Opportunities

There were many opportunities mentioned that could enhance HRM. Burnside Park is currently being used for industrial and commercial uses and is one of the main employment sites within HRM. Some respondents mentioned the enormous potential it presents as a mixed use development, if a residential use could be included. Another opportunity mentioned was expanding the use of the existing rail bed to include commuter rail transit.

Private and Gated Communities

Private and gated communities are not common in HRM. Some respondents viewed private or gated communities as exclusive enclaves that are not part of the Nova Scotian sensibility. In practical terms, many respondents spoke of the lack of awareness residents often have when buying a property on a private road. Residents are often surprised to find they've purchased a home on a private road and frequently request servicing (e.g., snow and garbage removal) from the city. Planners note that municipal authorities do not promote private roads and that the Regional Plan limits development on private roads.



Figure 26: Club house as part of a private condominium community in suburban HRM

And that's what they don't get. You have to build up in the urban core. It's the only way for sustainability. You can't build out. You can't sprawl on the peninsula. The peninsula's the peninsula. The land is defined. You can't go further.

Developer

I am a rural person. I grew up in the country. I don't see any benefits to private communities. I don't think they encourage good communities. They may be good communities within themselves but it's almost exclusionary in a way. I know a developer came to me once and said, "I'm thinking about building this gated community"... my point to him was that I believe that parks are meant to be shared, I believe that streets are meant to be shared, and I also believe that people were meant to be around other people. And so when you put a gate up, you know, we're almost becoming the United States where we're saying, "I'm afraid of you so I'm going to shut my door now, and I'm going to control what happens behind here."

Planner

Health

Respondents offered mixed opinions when asked if health was part of the discussion in planning and developing the suburbs. Many people pointed to physical infrastructure such as parks, trails, soccer fields and bike lanes. Many talked about walkability of a neighbourhood when the issue of health and planning was raised. The ability to garden was also mentioned by some. Developers with a non-planning background felt that health was not part of the discussion, whereas those trained in planning saw the connection.

Walking trails linking cul-de-sac streets to neighbouring streets are commonly found in suburban developments. Interestingly, one developer noted that these trails are established primarily for linking water mains and for access by emergency vehicles. While the initial purpose was for water and emergency access, they ultimately serve the purpose of providing non-motorized connections for residents.



Figure 27: Example of trail connecting two streets in a subdivision in HRM

Economic Crisis

Overall, HRM's rate of growth is considered slow to moderate. While the municipality does not boom, it rarely busts and it appears to be handling the economic crisis reasonably well. The economy is somewhat insulated due to the presence of constant industries such as government (federal, provincial, and municipal), the military, and universities. Some respondents felt that the economic crisis had definitely slowed development, while the majority felt little impact.

Interestingly, when asked about the economic crisis, many respondents would move on to speak about the potential economic impact that winning the federal shipbuilding contract would have on HRM.



Figure 28: Halifax Shipyard (Photo Credit: Paul Darrow, REUTERS; Source: www.canada.com)

You know, I think Halifax weathered the storm pretty well. I don't know that we're all the way through the other side. There's a lot of talk about whether it's over or not. And I worry that generally we may be headed for a far bigger bump, even globally. But in terms of recent economic trends, we're pretty sheltered for the fact that we are, you know, a port community, and, you know, a lot of the demand may lessen somewhat but we're not... We're diverse enough... I think generally overall, HRM doesn't do too badly.

Planner

Oh, it has affected development in this region in a big way. I think everybody is sitting on the fence. The market...you don't see a lot of starts. Single family is down. Condo [is] down. Like a lot of market development is down. So I think the mood in general is affected. There's no positive news on the global economic situation and so it affects us in a big way. We're all hoping that Halifax will get part of that ship building business. I think this will inject and install confidence in the market.

Developer

Conclusion

The suburbs of the Halifax Regional Municipality continue to evolve, becoming denser communities with various housing options. Recent master planned suburban areas consist of mixed uses and mixed housing types, including greater numbers of multi-unit dwellings. While the newly developing suburban areas are being master planned as mixed-use developments, respondents highlighted the need to address existing suburban areas with one respondent suggesting the need to re-invent the suburbs.

Despite increasing density in the suburbs, pressures continue for developments that provide large lots and estate homes in areas distant from the Regional Centre. Increasing density in existing developed areas will be a challenge the municipality will continue to face. The acceptance of granny suites and other small-scale efforts will be an important means of increasing density in established areas. Along with increased density, transportation will be a key element in the future sustainability of HRM. Many respondents highlighted the missed opportunity that commuter rail could provide through use of the existing rail bed.

While HRM may not experience the higher rates of growth seen in other parts of Canada, suburban areas continue to expand nonetheless.

But even in the suburbs, there's a real potential there for re-development to occur. And it doesn't have to be drastic. It doesn't have to be 'the suburbs are bad'. It's just more a re-invention of them and to get away from this solitary land use. The segregation of land use is what the suburbs were created for, was the reality of it. I won't get into the history of why the suburbs happened. But we need to deal with what we have...

Planner

All images by Heidi Craswell, unless otherwise indicated.

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