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THE DILEMMA OF DISPERSION

**BARRIERS TO SMART GROWTH AND
RECENTRALIZATION IN HALIFAX SUBURBS**

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Introduction

This report examines Halifax's planning strategies and policies for land use and transportation identifying barriers to the implementation of “smart growth” principles and the complementary land use strategy of urban recentralization in the suburbs of Halifax, Nova Scotia. Starting with a definition of smart growth, I rely on general criteria from the influential Canadian model described in Ontario’s legislated *Places to Grow* mandate (Ontario, 2013):

- Abate urbanization's environmental impacts by curtailing outward expansion
- Adapt to emerging social and economic realities including demographics and lifestyle changes
- Make more efficient use of existing urban infrastructure
- Improve the urban quality of life

Smart growth is premised on ideas related to the “sustainable development” movement entrenched in most Canadian urban planning regimes since the early-2000s (CMHC, 2005). Historically, post-War Halifax and other Canadian cities developed via the settlement pattern of dispersion, pejoratively called suburban sprawl. Sprawl decentralizes the built environment, physically separating productive workplaces from consumer households. In doing so, sprawl compels the inefficient use of energy, land, materials, and time compared to the more walkable compact urban morphologies common before the private automobile era. In Canada, the planning profession and sympathetic political interests embraced the smart growth ethos as an antidote to the perceived ills of sprawl (Blais, 2010).

Recentralization is a specific strategy within the smart growth philosophy aimed at physically concentrating employment, retail, transportation, and higher density residences around “nodes” of social and commercial activity (Filion and Saboonian, 2016). In most respects, this involves re-creating usage patterns, if not the exact streetscape or building forms, of urban downtowns (Cumbers and MacKinnon, 2004). The expected outcome of recentralization is an altered morphology of the built environment towards a more compact and integrated form.

The concept of creating centralized nodes on the peripheries of larger urban metropolises is not new. Ebenezer Howard’s garden city concept of the 1890s described this pattern, stressing multiple polycentric nodes around an urban core (Hodge & Robinson, 2001, p. 277). The recentralization strategy is grounded in modern planning history.

Reducing sprawl through recentralization requires changes to regulated land use drawing upon specific criteria for both regional and site development as well as transportation coordination (Blais, 2010). In this study, I explore Halifax’s potential to adopt recentralization in select suburban environments. In doing so I rely on the following characteristics of recentralization (Filion and Saboonian, 2016):

- Increase residential density favouring infill and redevelopment, as opposed to greenfield expansion

- Encourage mixed use developments so residents can work, live, and conduct commerce within a local perimeter
- Design for walkable environments so that social and commercial activities are undertaken with less reliance on automobiles
- Integrate transit options as an alternative to excessive automobile use and create transit hubs around mixed use centres

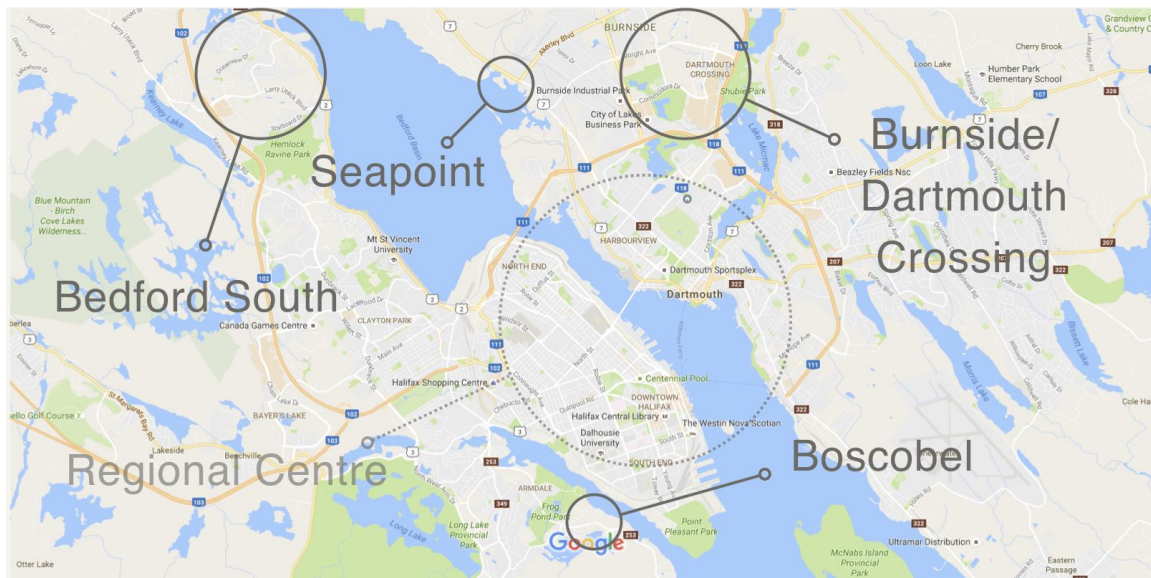
Previous studies on a Canada-wide basis testing for the effectiveness of suburban recentralization demonstrate mixed results (Filion and Saboonian, 2016). This study will contribute to that discussion by looking at barriers to suburban recentralization in Halifax. I take the “re” in recentralization literally and assume that the dominant pattern of land use in this region is that of dispersion based on decades worth of regulatory and land development inertia. From the evidence, I settle on an exploration and discussion of political, market, and natural environment barriers to reversing the dispersion trend.

In a broader context, it is necessary to state that Halifax is a relative latecomer to the application of smart growth policies, and as a medium-sized city has not experienced the same pressures of economic and population growth seen in other parts of the country. This is primarily due to an under-industrialized economy combined with distance from Canada’s economic heartland in Central Canada or more recently developed resource economies in Western Canada (Grant, 1994, p. 92).

APPROACH

Four suburban sub-geographies were chosen for analysis within the Halifax region, each demonstrating aspects challenging smart growth principles. All are ongoing developments so can be said to partially reflect today’s planning ethos. My fifth case study looks at the regional plan itself, and I begin with this analysis to provide a regulatory and political overview. My study areas were chosen based on comments from interviews including specific sites or those representing concepts mentioned. My case studies are as follows:

- I examine a region-wide attempt by municipal planning authorities and the Council(s) of the day at putting into the **2006 Regional Plan**, a recentralization concept known as “growth centres”.
- The second study area is a suburban master planned community, **Bedford South**, a parcel of greenfield terrain up the Basin, contiguous with Mainland Halifax. This large subdivision possesses a rugged natural topography and the governing planning regulations stress environmental protection.
- I then assess the **Burnside Complex**, a multi-function business park with services including: retail, research, logistics, warehouse, light manufacture, recreation, and financial services. The Burnside Complex has an economic and land use effect on all planning efforts in Halifax. The Complex is guided by a standalone set of planning and property management regulations.



Halifax map demonstrating case study sub-geographies and the regional centre for context. (Google Maps)

- Next, I examine the discrete experience of an exclusive subdivision called **Boscobel**. The development is small, at only two dozen lots of “executive”, detached homes, but significant in the context that Halifax only sees about 500 detached housing starts per year (CMHC, 2016).
- The last site is the **Seapoint** waterfront tower and townhouse complex, completed in 2015, with unique planning documents governing its development. It is primarily residential, with capacity for ground-level retail, and is directly adjacent to the Burnside Complex.

BACKGROUND

The dispersed built environment morphology in Halifax evolved from a political, regulatory, market, and environmental history. From a compact military naval harbour and fortress, Halifax’s outwards expansion and suburbanization reflect its planning history. For context, I provide the following summary.

In 1912, the Province established a *Town Planning Act* regulating development patterns, and through 1915 revisions: “...made planning compulsory, [and] required streets and subdivisions to be approved by a Planning Board” (Government of Nova Scotia: History, 2016). Before the Second World War, planning expectations were relaxed and Provincial advice replaced mandatory regulations on land use.

The 1945 and 1950 Halifax plans responded to returning World War Two veterans and the cost of housing them, holding up the detached suburban house as the desirable standard, but acknowledging that Peninsular land prices were prohibitive to housing at those low densities (Gregory, 2012). The 1945 plan also advocated urban renewal “slum clearances” and by doing so, compelled the movement of residents

outwards to the urban periphery (Gregory, 2012, p. 12). The 1950 plan entrenched the desire for clearance: the eventual outcome was a depopulated Halifax central business district with an increased focus on rehousing the population in the more affordable and increasingly accessible suburbs. The downtown was to house business; the suburbs people.

In 1957 a review of Halifax's development patterns was commissioned in partnership with the decade old Central [now Canada] Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), the Federal body legislatively tasked with overseeing Canada's housing sector through the *National Housing Act*.

The purpose of this Act, in relation to financing for housing, is to promote housing affordability and choice, to facilitate access to, and competition and efficiency in the provision of, housing finance, to protect the availability of adequate funding for housing at low cost, and generally to contribute to the well-being of the housing sector in the national economy. (Government of Canada, 1985)

The 1957 review, *A Redevelopment Study of Halifax*, was largely about the core peninsular area of the city (Stephenson, 1957). It suggested that the existing housing stock was of low quality and did not meet modern aspirations, particularly for lower income groups. The terms "obsolescent" and "overcrowded" were used, contributing to the justification for continuing urban renewal (Gregory, 2012). Regulated dislocations for "redevelopment" would mean transferring population growth to the suburbs, and this was the recommended policy (Stephenson, 1957, p. 23). Distinctly urban housing problems could be partially solved by suburbanization. And by 1957 there was direct Federal support for these policies in the form of mortgage insurance and planning advice from CMHC.

In 1963, again with CMHC and the Provincial Government, Halifax and the cross-harbour City of Dartmouth commissioned another report to explore suburban expansion area-by-area. This followed shortly after Dartmouth's 1961 amalgamation of its nearest suburbs, previously villages and unincorporated communities. The 1963 report was named the *Halifax Region Housing Survey: A Planning and Housing Study of the Halifax and Dartmouth Metropolitan Area* (the Coblentz Report, after its author). It explored housing quality, basic planning policies, and again advocated for the relocation of existing urban populations due to urban renewal, new building code standards, and increased access to roads, highways, and automobiles (Coblentz, 1963, p. 26). The facilitation of suburban dispersion by the expansion of private automobile use is established in planning and economic discourse (Glaeser & Kahn, 2003). Coblentz also identified "*Areas Suitable for the Economic Development of Planned Communities*", advice in line with the concept of master planned communities typical of North American suburban development patterns of the post-War years (Coblentz, 1963, p. 23).

By the late 1960s population and service area growth outpaced regulatory efficiency and a new *Planning Act* replaced the *Town Planning Act* with principles



Aerial photograph of the original City of Dartmouth and its newly acquired suburban perimeter. Note the large amount of undeveloped land, and the large forested area to the left side which was to become the Burnside Complex industrial and office park. (Halifax Archives)

premised on regional, not local, or community, oversight.

Community plans were to coordinate with the master regional plan, but in practice only the plan for Halifax Dartmouth ever came into force, and the over-arching policy of regional control is considered by the current Provincial Government to have been a “failure” (Government of Nova Scotia, History, 2016). That said, the “Halifax-Dartmouth metropolitan area benefitted from the

growth centre philosophy that guided regional development spending during the 1960s and early 1970s” (Grant, 1989, 281). Halifax and Dartmouth saw the inception and evolution of business parks during this period, geographically consolidating industrial and service sectors of the regional economy, not to mention for the entire province. Regional planning contributed to the suburbanization of residences and commerce while the private sector embraced the new wave of managerial capitalism where discrete business parks—industrial, technology, research, and office sub-types— reinforced the dispersion of not only residents and their houses, but of firms and employment (Mozingo, 2011).

Another activity in this era was CMHC’s Canada-wide sponsorship through direct investment and tax incentives of apartment block development in urbanizing areas of the country—some of which was public housing—as a response to higher than average birthrates of the post-War years (CMHC, 2011). Aspects of recentralization and densification began to appear as part of the formal planning process, but ran counter to the dominant trend of insured mortgages where lending policies distinctly favoured detached home ownership (Harris, 2004). The tensions between suburban outward expansion and economizing densification are apparent within CMHC’s



The Mic Mac Rotary in Dartmouth from about 1960 is a local example of highway infrastructure creating separation between land uses. (Halifax Archives)

policies and programs of the period. This is evident in the regional morphology where neighbourhoods of Halifax and Dartmouth possess denser (often social) housing developments built according to CMHC standardized, multi-unit criteria. Concurrently, spurred on by mortgage supports and CMHC-promoted design standards, detached homes in suburban neighbourhoods developed rapidly, using tract-style land planning as seen in the Westmount

and Albro Lake neighbourhoods in Halifax and Dartmouth respectively.

The 1980s appear to be an era of limited regulatory change with regards to planning. The urban cores of both Halifax and Dartmouth experienced falling densities and aging infrastructure burdens while the suburbs continued to expand, a pattern common across urban North American cities (Grant, 1994). Business parks as sources of employment, and an evolving consumerist lifestyle dominated by malls and traffic corridor commercial “strips”, contributed to the decline of downtown business and employment activity. The City of Halifax in the 1980s explored the idea of residential intensification of waterfront areas to revitalize the downtown, but by and large suburban dispersion was then the entrenched norm for an expanding population, with outlying suburbs such as Sackville and Cole Harbour following a low-density residential suburban settlement pattern, bleeding into a peri-urban morphology (Grant, 1994; Halifax, 2005).

The late 1990s saw major revisions to planning in the Halifax region. The first was the 1996 provincially imposed amalgamation of Halifax, Dartmouth, Bedford and Halifax County under a single municipal governing body. One justification for amalgamation was to reduce the costs of planning region-wide, an outcome not readily evident; what did appear to be successful was a reduction in cannibalistic competition between business parks (Poel, 2000). From this peacemaking, the region’s dominant business parks—Bayer’s Lake in Halifax and the Burnside Complex in Dartmouth—saw a dramatic increase in retail development of the “big box” variety, increasing their employment presence and further draining downtown commerce.

The second major event eventually impacting Halifax's urban morphology was the 1998 passage of the Province's *Municipal Government Act* (MGA). The MGA codified elements of sustainable development in its requirement that municipal government satisfy *Provincial Statements of Interest*, including: "...preserving high quality farmland, preventing development on known floodplains, protecting municipal drinking water supply areas, providing for affordable housing, and making the best use of existing infrastructure" (Government of Nova Scotia, 2016). The last phrase is a partner to densification and recentralization, while the others reflect smart growth's environmental perspective.

Moving forward to the mid-2000s, there is evidence in Halifax planning of the "creative class" writing of Richard Florida stressing revitalized downtowns with highly productive white-collar workers in emerging service industries, utilizing the best aspects of agglomeration, including densification, integration, and mixing—smart people for smart growth (Knudsen et al., 2007; Rutland, 2010). In 2006 Ontario formalized its *Places to Grow* policies making smart growth principles law in that province, influencing planning across Canada (Ontario, 2008). In response to these externalities, Halifax embarks on a central business district recentralization planning effort with the Downtown Plan, a distinct break from the suburban focus of prior decades. Work on the *Downtown Halifax Secondary Municipal Planning Strategy* project led to streamlined development approvals for that area, but also was an attempt to lure creative, office-type businesses back downtown from the business parks. The recentralization thrust also envisioned a re-population of the downtown, reversing the ideology of the 1945, 1950, 1957, and 1963 planning advice to disperse the citizenry. Following on the heels of the Downtown Plan is the Centre Plan, embracing wholeheartedly the recentralization concept of density, walkability and mixed use in the original urban core of Halifax and Dartmouth.

Are the suburbs being ignored now? Those I interviewed in 2016 agreed that the Centre Plan is currently the primary focus of Halifax's planning agenda and that suburban development is less of a priority. That said, planning movements and ideologies are cyclical, so whether that holds remains to be seen. In this report, I take the historical narrative of the local tensions between dispersion and recentralization and examine the potential for the current zeitgeist to alter Halifax's suburban morphology.

METHODS

Halifax Planning Documents

I reference Halifax Regional Municipality official plans and supporting literature that contain the legal infrastructure permitting development in the region. Each of the case studies possesses an oversight planning document linking the written aspirations and regulatory prescriptions with the built environment. Where necessary I reference the regional plan.

CMHC & Ontario

Informing the discussion are CMHC documents pertaining to the history of Halifax's development and the Federal role therein. Ontario supplies information pertaining to regulated smart growth principles.

Academic Research

For framework theories, I draw from a gamut of scholarly sources speaking to smart growth, recentralization, and urban sprawl in general. Where necessary I use scientific papers describing the natural topography, morphology, and geology applicable to my study area sub-geographies.

Photographs, Maps & Images

As this paper is substantially about the physical form of the built environment, each study area has accompanying photographs as evidence. Maps are used for general location awareness, and to demonstrate the morphological perspective.

Interviews

In summer 2016, I conducted a dozen interviews to supplement the documentary research. Respondents delivered information leading to selection of the case study areas. Local knowledge and history inform the findings within a range of subject matter expertise. Interviewees provide their own consensus or adversarial positions as to why land use has evolved towards the morphology we see today, and what trends in politics, planning, commerce, technology, and lifestyle will influence the future of Halifax's built environment.

Category	Code	Male	Female
Developers	D1, D2*, D3	2	1
Municipal Planners	P1, P2	2	0
Transit Planners	T1, T2	0	2
Elected Officials	E1, E2, E3	2	1
Stakeholders	S1, S2*	2	0
TOTALS	12	8	4

* denotes one interviewee who wore "two hats"

Most interviews were recorded for transcription. To protect the confidentiality of participants, I have given each person a code. The nomenclature for the respondents is: P = Planner. E = Elected Official. T = Transit Planner. D = Developer. S = Stakeholder (defined as an organized, publicly visible interest group routinely contributing to the region's planning dialogue). Gender is indicated by M = Male and F = Female. Numbers refer to the order of interviews, so E1M is elected official one, male.

CASE STUDY ONE

Halifax Regional Municipal Planning Strategy 2014

“Dots on a map”

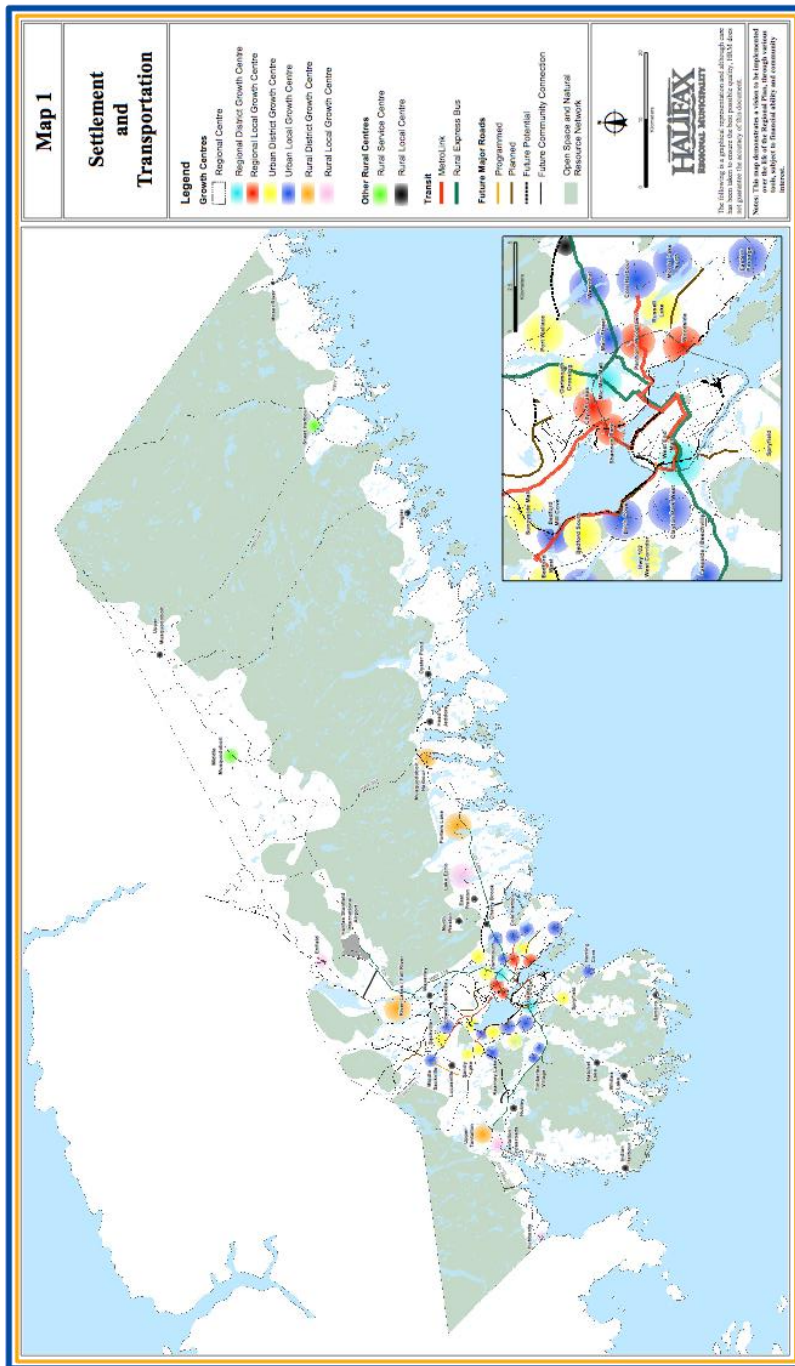
Greater Halifax is a regional municipality. In 1996, reacting to stresses with public finances and evidence of excessive competition between the cities over zoning, subsidies, tax rates, and infrastructure costs, the Province of Nova Scotia forced regional political and administrative amalgamation through its legislative prerogative. Halifax Regional Municipality became a single entity with urban, rural, and suburban settlements (Poel, 2004).

This combined entity internalized political tensions between what were previously independent municipal entities (E1M). The divisions between city / suburb / and rural area were evident within the governing Municipal Council, and pervaded instructions given to planning staff. Planning services were amalgamated, though existing By-laws and planning strategies were retained until a comprehensive rework was undertaken, a process that is ongoing today, 20 years after (PM2).

In 2002 Halifax launched a regional planning process. In 2006 the resulting strategy proposed a “growth centre strategy” as part of controlling and shaping growth; the core theme reflected the emerging smart growth, centralizing consensus (Blais, 2010; Filion and Saboonian, 2016; Ontario, 2008, 2013). Instead of recentralization around a small number of nodes, council and planning staff identified 26 separate growth centres, referred to by one interviewee as “dots on a map” (P1M).

Many outlying communities absorbed during amalgamation, along with distinct suburban areas, became “growth centres”. Each growth centre was to get its own secondary planning strategy. As of 2016, however, few of the secondary strategies have been developed. Interviewees had difficulty describing specifics about the growth centres or their purpose.

The driving force for a disseminated growth centre initiative was political. Each Council representative sought a share of the development and budgetary pie for their respective constituencies (P1M). To assist (or restrict) staff in prioritizing infrastructure and resource allocation (including budgets) these “growth centres”



The regional plan map used for growth centre reference. (RMPS 2014)

were further divided into urban, suburban, or rural types, and even further sub-divided giving each dot a regional, service, or district emphasis.

And private events overtook the “growth centre” initiative. In 2007, working on pre-existing development rights, a private developer started construction of a substantial “big box” super-centre known as Dartmouth Crossing (detailed in a following section). According to one interviewee: “Dartmouth Crossing really took us by surprise...we were blinded” (P1M). This development was not part of the recently agreed-upon strategy, so had to be added posthaste, so another “dot” was added to the map.

At face value, multiple growth centres defeat the principles of suburban recentralization, at least

at the scale demonstrated in other Canadian municipalities. By comparison the Greater Toronto Area (actually, the entire Southern Ontario Golden Horseshoe) identifies 25 dedicated growth centres in its Places to Grow strategy (Ontario, 2008). This is for a population 20 times larger than Halifax and with a growth rate estimated at 2.5 times greater.

If everywhere is a “growth centre” there is no effective centre—both economic and demographic growth are dispersed. Multiple growth centres are embedded in the

regional plan and maps providing a centrifugal motive within the larger planning dialogue of recentralization's centripetal objective, even if implementation has been poor. Interviewees agreed that this political dispersion effect has been a distraction with an obtuse complexity in its categorizations and objectives. Interviewees did say that activity on this part of the "file" (meaning development of the sub-plans and related work on each "dot") has been non-existent the last few years with most of the focus on the Downtown and Centre plans (P1M). Still, politicians from the outlying districts routinely refer to the "dots on the map" in committee discussions when growth concepts and budgets are at stake (E1M).

Transit planners pointed out that Council adopted a counterpoint to the dispersive effects of the "dots on a map" growth strategy. In 2010 Halifax adopted a service boundary (not a growth boundary) whereby transit, water, and refuse services would not be extended based on the excessive costs of continuing with a linear infrastructure pattern. This perimeter effect meant that growth tied to dispersed political efforts would have to be undone by a vote to extend municipal services. So the "dots on a map" was neutered by a competing policy. The revision of the Regional Plan in 2014 finally put the various growth centres to rest.

CASE STUDY TWO

Bedford South

“What the glaciers left behind”

This contemporary residential suburb demonstrates how topography and planned green space can shape a neighbourhood in ways compromising to recentralization. Bedford South's built environment is derived from a narrative of natural topography. The area where Bedford South is now was not designated for any development in the Coblenz Report. Instead the map identified the area as “rock”, and specifically excluded it from residential housing potential (Coblenz, 1963, p.22).

Halifax was covered by glaciers in the last ice age, severely compressing and fracturing the already hard rock, itself a remnant of an ancient mountain range (Goodwin and White, 2011). The sub-surface conditions are granite and related geological formations. These formations extend in ridges arching and curving down to the Bedford Basin waterline. At the top of Bedford South these ridges flatten somewhat into a plateau riven by small lakes and ponds which settled into the



The morphology of Bedford South is revealed as distinctly suburban, yet development follows the natural contours of the land, and includes considerable greenbelt space. (Google Maps)

crevices and small valleys left by the irregular retreat of the glacial ice (Government of Canada, 2010). Between these formations lie ravines loaded with migratory boulders

left behind by the Pleistocene melt and retreat. These are the natural topographical conditions upon which the Bedford South master planned community is situated.

Bedford South is directly north of and, contiguous to, Mainland Halifax. It is the nearest suburb to Halifax proper that is not across a bridge. As such it is economically and geographically the natural place to expand the city perimeter facilitated by the established road system which hugs the Bedford basin coastline. That this development was not attempted until the mid-2000s is testament to the prevalence of bedrock so close to the surface, peppered with ravines and boulders. There were easier, more economically rewarding places to build as the Coblenz Report noted in the 1960s, even if that meant longer commutes. The decision to create a master planned community was therefore a function of opportunity cost (it was begun when energy prices peaked) and the evolution of economically viable and technically efficient means to construct a subdivision on a rocky hillside and bedrock plateau.

Half the interview respondents indicated Bedford South could be considered a success in achieving at least some smart growth principles, even if the overall morphology does not convey recentralization, and despite it being a greenfield, urban perimeter expansion. Interview respondents pointed to the typology of closely built housing and the large number of multi-storey apartment blocks in the development as proof of success at the densification concept:

So there's still a little bit of the fantasy at work there that all those nodes can have like an urban lifestyle. But some of the big ones – Bedford South in particular has been shown to be really successful.
(E2M)

Bedford South possesses at least 24 multi-family structures (more are under development), averaging about 9 stories, containing a minimum of 60 units each of various floor plans, from one bedroom to 3-bedroom units. The transit planner interviewees noted the community has well-used and popular bus routes, so can be considered a success in the overall scheme of integrating mobility options.

Yet the morphology of Bedford South is typically suburban, both from the overhead perspective and from a ground survey. The distance between buildings and clusters is substantial. Green belts separate uses and the commercial zone is front-



Section of the map from the Coblenz Report, with Bedford South circled. (p. 23 foldout)

loaded parking amongst low-rise, traditionally suburban building forms, both multi-



Not the “white picket fence” ideal of suburban housing.

unit structures and detached houses. Sidewalks line only one half of the side streets. The dominant building form once off the main road (Larry Uteck Boulevard) is the single detached home, arranged in the curves and cul-de-sacs typical of late 20th century suburban development. A visual analysis shows status quo

dispersion rather than a tight streetscape centered around a commercial space and vertical buildings directly adjoining. Instead, there is distance and spaciousness in the urban form.

In a local context, the estimated “success” of Bedford South is that of doing the best with what was available. The selection of this site for development is a case of path dependency; it is the next geography available in Halifax without skipping kilometres up the highway to a more shovel-friendly geography. The opportunity cost of

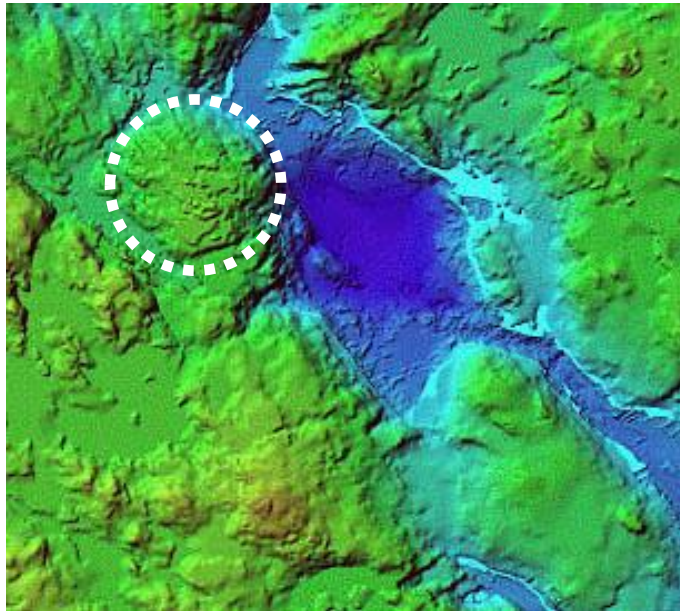
development overcame the combined costs of the extended transportation distance and that of dealing with the geological legacy.

Why the distance between buildings and clusters? Three main criteria explain how the dispersed Bedford South suburban form is difficult to replace with a more compact form — where built environment meets natural environment, with a little bit of regulatory irony thrown in.

The sub-surface rock conditions alone are deterministic to site-specific built forms and the overall morphology. The costs to excavate are prohibitive. When constructing the nearby Highway 113, acidic rock was noted as a risk for the area

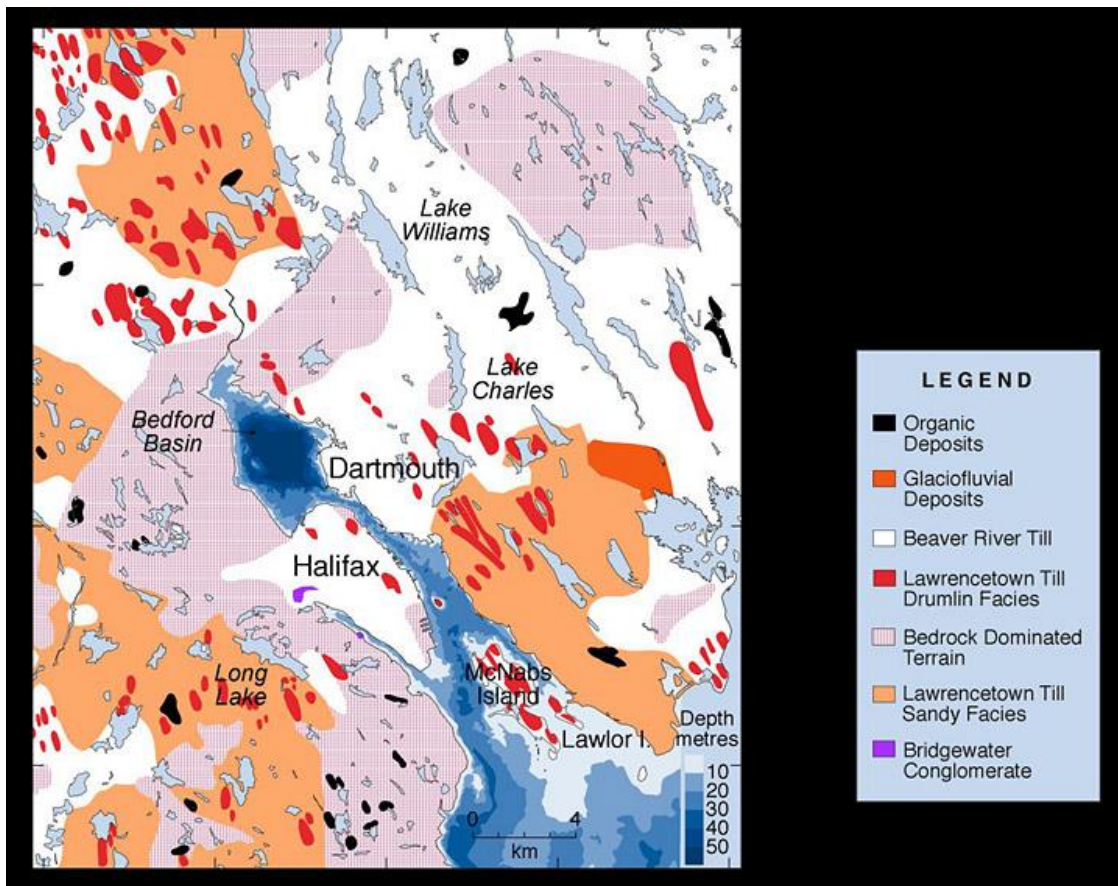
(Government of Nova Scotia, TIR, 2009). It cannot be simply excavated and used on-site due to leachate concerns and nearness to watersheds, shorelines, and fisheries (adding surface exposure by quarrying causes and increase in sulphur release when water runs over aggregate) (TIR, 2009). The starting cost of acidic rock offsite removal is \$125/yard³ in the local market, about 10 times that of non-acidic fill removal. These financial risks lead to most development in the region built with as little underground superstructure as possible. That in turn means amenities such as parking must be located at surface level. Most multi-unit buildings use the podium system to create a concrete parkade, which then in turn is the structural base for the residential or commercial components above. The inability to go deep limits height, so infrastructure must utilize horizontal space instead of vertical. Consequently, the site-specific tendency is outwards, not upwards, affecting both the underlying structural components as well as water mains, electrical, and elevator systems.

The rock also creates another set of site-specific conditions, which, when multiplied across the development, make compact building forms difficult to implement. Water control is the main obstacle. Bedford South's hard rock geology means that rain and meltwater can pool in impermeable depressions — both natural and manufactured — to the detriment of adjacent buildings, streets, and underground systems like water mains. The concern in winter is especially critical as the rock does not allow for sub-surface ice expansion, threatening building foundations in the event of a prolonged cold snap, exacerbated by the prevailing winter weather in the region where there can be multiple freeze/thaw cycles, even in a single day. Water in such conditions needs



A morphology (topography) map of Bedford Harbour basin with Bedford South circled. The slope is very steep and exhibits broken formation elements. (NRCAN Bedford Basin Maps)

runoff channels. Bedford South is riven with artificial swales designed to move the water away from buildings. Limited permeability means the water path is mostly surface, so there must be distance between buildings to avoid compression against



Bedford South and the entire sloping region towards the Basin are dominated by bedrock terrain. (NRCAN Bedford Basin Maps)

structures. As a result, all multi-unit dwellings are surrounded by runoff channels designed to mimic natural watercourse patterns in a heavily modified built environment. This is specified in the planning regulations to avoid “flooding of downstream developments” (Halifax MPS for Bedford, 2015, p. 76).

Weather also plays a role in land use related to snow inventory management, where snow is a delayed reservoir of precipitation. The winter of 2015 brought up to 4 metres of accumulated snow, something infrequent but possible in the region. Managing that amount in such rocky conditions required forethought in the development process. Exposed side lots at the terminus of a row of houses is a place to pile snow as are small green belts serving a dual purpose as privacy barriers on larger projects. Hydrogeological specifications were a factor in site location, building

form, and the separation of buildings and related artificial structures (fire suppression, electrical junctions, bus stops).



Swales and building separation.

Another factor explaining the distance between built forms in Bedford South originates from the area's governing plans and corresponding regulatory environment:

Policy E-4 prohibits the erection of single dwelling units, two unit dwellings, and townhouses or the

excavation or infilling of land within fifty feet of a watercourse or water retention area to distance disturbed areas from watercourses to minimize the potential for sedimentation. This fifty foot buffer shall be maintained with existing vegetation. Multiple unit dwellings shall be subject to the same setback and buffer provisions as commercial and industrial uses. (Halifax MPS for Bedford, 2015, p. 133)

With the local topography challenged by rock and water management these distancing provisions compel development to adhere to small waterway contours in between the moraine and exposed bedrock ridges. The result is a series of looping streets where cul-de-sacs end against waterways and unmovable rock formations ("loops and lollipops") (CMHC, 2002). In a grid-type suburb, those same waterways would have been filled in, as was done routinely on the Halifax Peninsula and even the Fairfield neighbourhood just south of Bedford, developed in the 1950s and 60s before environmental sensitivities were part of the regulatory matrix. The irony is that these setback regulations are part of the same environmental awareness that smart growth and recentralization are premised on—they share the same DNA. A dispersed form factor for larger buildings and clusters of smaller buildings is necessary to avoid compromising waterways. Street permeability is similarly affected where linking across waterways (from ridge to ridge) is not permitted except in areas where the watercourse can be preserved. The morphology of development roughly follows the



Compressed rock and an expensive road cut.

natural striations of the land, so major roads run from the plateau down to the waterfront, and side roads are limited in their ability to induce cross-traffic. It can be difficult to drive from one side of Bedford South to the other, much less walk, unless one takes the specified walking trails. Greenbelts

provide recreational trails used also for school walking commutes. Some terrain between built areas is a greenbelt simply because it is unbuildable for any purpose at any economic cost. The suburb runs around these ridges so the morphological effect is predominantly curvilinear.

There is another irony noticeable in the vegetative cover that the regulations demand. Unlike the more compact suburbs of the regional centre where the dominant feature is non-native (and invasive) species such as Norway Maples, lilacs, yew and similar shrubbery, the vegetative buffering in Bedford South's green areas is primarily what the developers did not cut down. It is native Acadian scrub forest with a sparse, yet complex undergrowth suited to the rocky terrain. Instead of imported trees, the main species are White Spruce, Jack Pine, and Eastern Hemlock. Ecological preservation in the development is more "natural" than most of the inner city neighbourhoods, those same neighbourhoods which provide a template for smart growth ideology. Even the backyards as seen in the images respect the natural vegetation, and trimmed front yards have minimal setbacks, mostly to accommodate snow, privacy, and a single car-length driveway. This is not to say the area is an



Detached suburban homes, but limited yards with rock, snow, and greenbelt buffers.

ecological reserve (it is still a residential suburb, heavily modified with the human imprint, dependent on the automobile), but compared to the ideals of compact development, Bedford South shows how difficult it can be to achieve the purity of a concept within a framework where regulated environmental principles compromise the anti-sprawl position. These site-specific details, when added up, encourage a more sprawling morphology combined with the effects of the natural topography.

The Bedford South secondary plan takes a somewhat positive approach to the challenges of the area:

The residential neighbourhoods encompass lands of varying topography allowing for differing identities and a range of housing opportunities within each. (Halifax MPS for Bedford, 2015, p. 75)

And this is what we see. The major transportation artery of Larry Uteck Boulevard through the community is a ribbon of denser structures, albeit strung out along a steep, barely walkable slope (at almost 10 degrees the slope would be very difficult to manage in freezing rain, not uncommon in Nova Scotia winters). Where the detached homes are located varies considerably—likely price-dependent—with the amount of rock in the yard a determining factor in the pre-market and resale evaluations. As can be seen in the images, backyards are compromised by ravine, rock, green belt, swales, and space for snow. This is hardly the ideal of white picket fence suburbia; the ground is too hard for fences in Bedford South.

That the principles of smart growth can be “a-geographical” is a known flaw in the movement’s critique of urban forms and development patterns (Blais, 2010 p. 164). Bedford South reveals the challenges of trying to fit a certain number and variety of

affordable housing units into a challenging geography. That interview respondents identified it as “dense” must be understood in a relative context. Is the area walkable? To the bus stop on a major artery and along the greenbelt walking trails it is, but this does not fit the live/work objectives of recentralization. The area is still auto-centric as the topographic boundaries (and highways) of the community would not permit enough commercial development to be self-sufficient, so long-range commuting is unavoidable.

CASE STUDY THREE

The Burnside Complex

One interview respondent was unequivocal about the current development pattern in Peninsular Halifax’s central business district, and especially the original downtown:

We’ve come back from the dead... There’s an incredible renaissance going on. Reinvestment has begun again downtown, not just public but private in a very large way — private investment as well. (E3M)

The reference is to the number of large-scale construction projects underway in the downtown area. Halifax is undergoing a recentralization process in the original central business district, spurred in part by comprehensive changes to land use policies and regulatory streamlining of the development approval process. All interviewees concurred with that assessment. On the face of it, there is consensus that recentralization, at least of the downtown core if not the suburbs, is effective public policy.

“Where the businesses roam”

The presence of construction cranes, however, does not necessarily mean secure business tenancy for office units being constructed, and this was sharply revealed in

the interviews. One planner admitted that the downtown and regional centre struggles with office vacancy rates at historic highs, and that street level retail also demonstrates vacancies. By one respondent estimate, at least 400,000 square feet is set to come online in 2017 with no tenancy in place (P2M). Despite this, more office projects are planned. When queried, interviewees replied candidly that commercial real estate is now a financialized asset and solvency hedge given the persistent state of very low interest rates. As a result, Halifax's



New facilities are a major draw for the Burnside Complex, as is the capacity to expand (or shrink) spatial needs depending on business conditions. This is different from mixed use, centralized structures where the physical building form is less less flexible.

downtown investment shows signs of being a market play by pension funds, insurers, commercial mortgage-backed securities, and real estate investment trusts. One interviewee said that investors were “willing to let office space and storefronts lie vacant and take an operational loss while retaining the underlying asset, the land”, and predicted that “for the foreseeable future there will be large-scale vacancies.” (P2M)

Financialization as the means of development may not lead to economically efficient land use. Capital cannot “move in” (Rutland, 2010, p. 1172). Economically productive tenants who employ people are needed. Financialization combined with recentralization might lead to shiny new buildings downtown with few tenants.

When interviewee discussions switched to suburban commercial space there was a different tone. All respondents mentioned the ongoing success of the dominant, full-featured business park in the Halifax region as affects downtown recentralization and competition for tenants. That business cluster I will call the Burnside Complex: its economic and spatial presence within the Halifax catchment area represents entrenched suburban commercial dispersion.

The Burnside Complex includes three components – Burnside Industrial Park, City of Lakes Business Park, and Dartmouth Crossing -- located in Dartmouth, across the harbour from Halifax. These combined, contiguous business parks are regulated through a separate planning system within the Halifax governance structure. The area has Nova Scotia's largest grouping of light manufacturing, distribution, commercial, and service enterprises and is handily the largest conglomeration of business interests, both private and public, in Atlantic Canada. Halifax recognizes 16 business parks in



The Burnside Complex includes industrial, office, and retail components. There is still space allocated for expansion. More recent is the building of regional, public sport and recreation centres premised on the capacity of users to commute via automobile to the facilities. (Google Maps)

its *Business Park Functional Plan* but the Dartmouth grouping is by far the largest both in geographic area and number of enterprises established within its perimeter. The Burnside Complex consists of three adjacent sub-entities each with a specialization, although changing market profiles over time has diminished the differences among them.

Burnside Industrial Park is the original component. It began in the 1970s as a light industrial and warehouse area, set aside by the City of Dartmouth on municipal property. The *Coblentz Report* had recommended the Burnside area for industry. Its main advantage is the site's ideal location between two major highways and a rail line, only 20 minutes from the Stanfield International Airport. The park acts as a logistics centre, warehouse district, distribution node, and intermodal transport hub. The Halifax Chamber of Commerce head office is in the park. Types of businesses vary from breweries and medical clinics to cement plants, but the major business type involves industrial or commercial goods requiring warehousing and trucking logistics. Construction industry suppliers are prominent, including light manufacture, fabrication, and heavy machinery sales and service. This is accompanied by a marine supply sector.

Recreation facilities are recent additions to the park including baseball/softball diamonds, football fields (all fields are nighttime floodlit), and, as of this writing, a 4-

rink skating arena is under construction as a supplement to the region's ice-based recreation offering. Halifax Transit's main office and fleet operational centre are located in Burnside, as is the Central Nova Scotia Correctional Facility, a provincial prison, which serves the criminal justice system alongside the related East Coast Forensic Hospital.

A general survey of firms operating in Burnside today shows how varied its sectoral profile is compared to its original descriptive title as an "industrial" park. The Functional Plan describes the status of the business park:

Burnside is approximately 3,400 acres in size, of which approximately 1,200 acres have been developed. As the pre-eminent business park in HRM, it is the preferred location for many national and international companies. It caters to a variety of users from numerous sectors including office, warehousing, government facilities, and retail showrooms. According to the Greater Burnside Business Association, over 18,000 employees work in the park. With its concentration of employment, a number of support services have also developed, including restaurants, hotels and professional



Prominent service businesses are now established in the Burnside Complex drawn by low land costs, new buildings, closeness to transportation links, the proximity of suburbs for staff, and to be near their customer base.

services. It is expected that Burnside will continue to be sought after by companies looking for land in Halifax, but after years of significant demand, land availability for future expansion is becoming a pressing concern. (Halifax Business Park Functional Plan, 2008, p. 17)

City-of-Lakes Office Park is immediately beside Burnside and can best be described by the Functional Plan:

In 1984, [Dartmouth] City Council approved the creation of the City of Lakes Business Park, situated on lands east of Burnside Drive in the vicinity of the interchange at Highway 111. It is the City's objective to encourage the development of the Business Park as a high profile, prestigious office and business location. The unique natural amenities of the area, coupled with its optimum location as a "gateway" site to the City and indeed the entire metro area, provide an ideal setting for development of the Business Park as a quality office location.

The City of Lakes Business Park will attract office uses which neither desire nor require a downtown location. In order to enhance the attractiveness of the Business Park as an office location, provide for a significant and concentrated employment node and increase the economic viability of development projects, office buildings in the Business Park should be permitted to increase from a present height limitation of three storeys to five storeys in height. (Halifax RMPS, 2014, p. 77)

A little history should be noted. Prior to the 1996 amalgamation, Dartmouth and Halifax competed for private sector business investment through regulatory politics. City of Lakes was Dartmouth's response to Halifax's downtown office spaces and was also an acknowledgement that the traditional Dartmouth downtown did not have the land supply nor infrastructure capable of supporting larger office developments. Halifax responded by supporting dedicated office parks of its own, especially in Bayers Lake, but did so later than Dartmouth. Each city suburbanized office uses through zoning regulation and municipal land ownership prerogatives. In part, this competition between adjacent municipalities created the impetus for amalgamation in 1996, stemming from concerns that competition was turning into cannibalization given the region's slow growth economy. Nevertheless, the practice continues where City of Lakes is designated for office type land use, and expansion of the park continues, embedded in the *Functional Plan*. It could be reasonably said that the Burnside Complex in its entirety "won" the competition between Halifax and Dartmouth for commercial development as Burnside is now much larger in size and broader in scope in the number and types of firms located within than Bayers Lake. Bayers Lake did have a vestige of industry until the 1990s when the Volvo automobile assembly plant closed (Anastakis, 2004).

Dartmouth Crossing is the third component of the Burnside Complex and provides retail mixed with a growing office component, overlapping the City of Lakes' objective. Canada's newest IKEA and Cabela's (furniture and outdoor outfitting stores) are currently under construction adding hundreds of thousands of square feet of retail and hundreds of jobs. Whereas Burnside and City of Lakes business parks are municipal land leased or sold to private sector enterprises, Dartmouth Crossing is a privately held development:

The first retail developments in Dartmouth Crossing were opened in 2007 on this 511 acre site adjacent to Burnside and City of Lakes. The former Whebby quarry lands were redeveloped by North American Development Group as a combination of Big Box

stores, a boutique retail development (modeled on the retail lifestyle centre concept), theatres, and restaurants. As of January 2008, 200 acres of the site were developed. In 2007, the developer sold about half of its developed holdings to a major institutional investor (CREIT).

North American Real Estate future plans for the remaining lands at Dartmouth Crossing include a number of uses, including a green office campus called 'The Ridge', a proposed multi-surface arena, and additional large format retail facilities.

It is estimated that The Ridge office campus will provide approximately 700,000 SF of LEED silver office space in a dozen or more buildings surrounding the eastern side of Frenchmans Lake. (Halifax Business Park Functional Plan, 2008, p. 17)

The issue of business park impact was brought up by interviewees discussing the concept of recentralizing Halifax's suburbs addressing the non-residential potential. Some interviews were conducted in these business parks as that is where offices are located. This irony was not lost on interviewees and it led to soul searching in their responses concerning the application of smart growth criteria and the reality of the evolved urban form. This was reflected in policy statements, as with this example:

You know, it can be tricky for us representing businesses that are in suburban parks and downtown office buildings. That we can't really be demonizing one over the other too aggressively. You know, we fully support the downtown core, and that is our priority. But you know, if IKEA comes to town and wants to build in Dartmouth Crossing, we're not going to be the ones who are out there complaining about it. (S3M)

Planner P2M summarized:

Many jobs have moved to the suburbs. This can be good as it eases congestion onto the Peninsula for traffic and transit, but it is dispersion. These employers aren't locating in the older town centres but set up in automobile-centered business settings.

Despite a political and planning focus on downtown and regional centre recentralization, Halifax area businesses continues to relocate to the special use business parks, including government services, according to respondent T2F:

A lot of what it had to do with is transportation and parking. We've heard from a number of people that are moving into buildings in business parks that are LEED buildings. So they're environmentally sustainable, right. So they have less parking than required for the number of employees that they have. So they're actually moving to suburban areas with less parking than they would have had downtown. But they go from having 20 bus routes coming from all different places to one bus route that goes every hour and just parking on the streets...unfortunately a number of them are actually provincial and federal offices. I mean what's clearly happened is they've gone to tender, and it's low bid. So that's where they go, right?

The interplay and tension between the Halifax business parks and the downtown redevelopment focus was echoed by interviewee E2M who noted from expertise that:

...if you put Burnside and downtown Halifax together, they generate 67% of commercial taxes by themselves. So those are your golden eggs. And the funny thing is we always focus on how we were neglecting downtown, neglecting downtown. Up until a couple of years ago, we were also neglecting Burnside.

Business parks are inherently suburban. Although it is widely acknowledged the first business park was in Old Trafford in Manchester, UK, in the late 1880s, the widespread adoption of this form of land development solely for commercial purposes in a dispersed form was enabled by the automobile in the hands of workers and by the direct sponsorship of municipalities (Mozingo, 2011). In Halifax, the creation of dedicated business parks was by overt municipal design as the original location of these clusters was on municipal land, and the regulatory structure advanced their dispersed suburban form. Euclidean zoning principles played a part as noted in Burnside's naming as an "industrial park", nominally separating smokestacks from housing. Transportation logistics played their role with the growth of long-haul trucking, just-in-time inventory, and mass warehousing utilizing increased space over previous forms of commercial activity:

Warehouse space is evolving in order to respond to changes in the logistics supply chain. Rising fuel costs are placing emphasis on rail, and improved truck distribution systems (tandem/double trailers). As a result, transportation infrastructure needs to accommodate larger trucks. (Halifax Business Park Functional Plan, 2008, p. 3)

Logistics plays a major role, too, in retail where big box superstores locate their facilities with highway connectivity as a priority. The co-location choice of Dartmouth Crossing to Burnside relates to larger trends in retail blurring the distinction between the supply side and consumption side, where retail "showrooms" are fronts for an



Dartmouth Crossing is Atlantic Canada's largest concentration of retail outlets, mostly in the "big box" format. The site is still expanding, but some strip, smaller stores are currently vacant. (Dartmouth Crossing)

integrated warehouse component. Costco, Canadian Tire, and Walmart have superstores located in Dartmouth Crossing, alongside the "category killers" of hyper-specialized retail such as Toys 'r' Us and PetSmart, all of which utilize advanced inventory management and warehouse processes to squeeze out efficiencies in delivery of goods based largely on economy-of-scale fundamentals. The distinctions between a retail business park and an industrial business park, at least in the Halifax context, have become superficial. Big box stores are named for their physical size and dimensions patterned after the boxy warehouse footprint. This explains the close association between the original Burnside warehouse and industrial district and the retail at Dartmouth Crossing. They are mirror images reflecting a consolidation of warehouse and retail in the physical form. Even the Burnside heavy equipment distributors showcase their

equipment like the nearby automobile dealerships.

Retail logistics at such scales are a 24/7 operation, continuing the rationale for separation of uses due to the constant presence of industrial-scale trucking within the



The dominant building form is the warehouse, with service bays at the back. Roads are the size of secondary highways and have strategic bends to slow down large vehicles. A considerable amount of space between buildings is evident.

local environment. At a site-specific-level, these retail stores have exacting spatial requirements for shipping accessibility:

Ample space is provided for shipping and distribution on the backside of the store. Multiple loading bays ensure that overlapping deliveries do not cause a delay. These areas are often accessible by dedicated roads, back alleys, and/or turnouts, so as to separate delivery trucks from customer traffic.” (Press, 2006, p. 32)

Similarly, the distinction between knowledge and service industries appears to fade. As noted earlier by interviewees, business continue to relocate to the dedicated parks away from the regional centre and downtown. Cost explains some of the motive. Stakeholder interviewee S3M noted taxation rates favoured the dispersed Burnside Complex. And parking for staff and customers—relevant to the scale of these businesses either as employers or for their customers—was frequently mentioned. As a result, the Dartmouth business parks attract white collar businesses, including insurers, government employee unions, and even a Dartmouth site of the Halifax Regional Police force. The “industrial” segmentation of land use implied in the nomenclature is a misnomer. What is observed is a distinct clustering of commercial



Dartmouth Crossing as a retail super centre is almost entirely auto-centric. Transit planners commented on how difficult it is to service such a dispersed area.

activities and services of all types with considerable variety. Within this diversity, however, we observe a distinct homogeneity of the built form. Architecturally almost all buildings within Dartmouth parks are block-like, low-rise, warehouse-type structures. Many are multi-unit but all possess a certain aesthetic sameness differentiated by large corporate signs and logos.

The Burnside Complex's dispersed morphology derives from site-specific planning rules limiting lot coverage per building or groupings of buildings. I was unable to ascertain if these specifications reflect demands by commercial operators for functional space—those discussions being historic now, yet ingrained in the regulatory structure. For example, Burnside and City of Lakes "site development standards" from the *Business Park Functional Plan* compel wide lot coverage:

- *Site Coverage: Minimum completed building area is not less than 10% and not more than 50% of site size.*
- *Building Construction: Minimum set back from front property line is 40 feet; side yard is specified in the municipal building by-law.*
- *Parking: On-street parking is prohibited. Areas for off-street loading and unloading are to be provided at the sides and rear of buildings.*

The regulated dimensionality is the opposite of intensification. None of the criteria for recentralization applies to the Burnside Complex, nor is there any semblance of the criteria noted in the plans (the term "mixed use" is used in the *Functional Plan*, but it

means office mixed with warehouse; terminology is fungible). All three business parks are auto-centric to the point that one of the respondents described how Halifax Transit employees must walk one kilometre down a road without sidewalks as the area is not designed for pedestrians. Transit to and within the business parks is similarly challenged:

...at the end of the day, the parking lots are still front loaded, still big box development. That's difficult for us to provide quality service particularly when we have a fixed pot of resources and it takes so long to get there and it's spread so thin. Trying to serve it efficiently is challenging. (T1F).

While Dartmouth Crossing's business owners floated a plan in 2009 to construct residential units on a portion of their land—and even asked the municipality for some of Burnside's undeveloped land to be allocated to that effort via a development agreement—the request was rescinded by the developer in 2015. A study funded by CMHC in 1993 examined the potential for interspersed residential development within the expansiveness of the park, but the downsides were overwhelming; and in any case, a scattering of residences in and amongst the sprawling warehouses of Burnside would be the opposite of a compete community, walkable and mixed (Grant, Joudrey and Klynstra, 1994). The entire business park geography is bounded by major provincial highways forming definitive barriers to pedestrian access. Those same highways, at a macro-regional level, segregate the intensely commercial environment of the parks from residential areas to the south and east.

The Burnside Complex is resolutely premised on being specialized commercial geography. An irony presents itself in that the variety of commercial activities within its bounds is greater than that of the downtown or other regional competitors. The “mix” of commercial types encompasses almost every type of business necessary for a functioning North American city. By comparison, Halifax downtown is more homogeneous in office structure and business type, almost exclusively white collar, restaurant, and tourism. This observation brings into question the assumption as to just what is meant in the smart growth template for “mixed use” and how that accommodates the gamut of commercial activities present in the regional economy (Grant, 2002). The smart growth agenda struggles with the concept of business parks as the firms therein have spatial needs that defy, and indeed might be made less efficient, by intensification. Pamela Blais in *Perverse Cities* writes:

...the economic context imposes constraints upon planning that are not always well recognized or understood. In this global economy, the drivers of urban development often extend well beyond the reach of local regulation. For example, globalization, specialization, and corporate consolidation work together to propel the increasing size and specialization of manufacturing and retail facilities. One need look no farther than the local 20,000-square-foot PetSmart or Golftown or the 100,000-plus-square-foot Walmart for evidence of this trend. These basic retail modules are often difficult to integrate within communities along new urbanist or smart growth lines. (Blais, 2010, p. 229)



There is still considerable room for growth in the Burnside Complex and construction activity is ongoing, built to tenant specification and generally not on speculation as is the case with Halifax Downtown.

The Burnside Complex morphology could originally be explained by the application of Euclidian zoning principles, especially by the industrial moniker assigned. But the continued growth and economic importance both for employment and tax revenues, not to mention the constant drag on redevelopment of the regional centre, speaks to deeper forces at work, as Blais acknowledges.

How do we explain those forces? The finding of note within the structure of the Burnside Complex is not suburban sprawl per se. It is, instead, the concentration of the region's widest variety of firms and material goods that stands out. And it is not a dense morphology by any means, but a cluster of vertically and horizontally interrelated private and public enterprises. One line of thought comes from the study of economic geography and agglomeration effects, specifically regional and local clustering (Cumbers & MacKinnon, 2004). Originally all three business parks had separate specializations: industrial, office, and retail. Their immediate proximity, similar architectural form, similar site-specific land use patterns, similar morphology, and the most diverse variety of business types in the region suggests synergy among them. The evidence suggests that the Burnside Complex acts as an agglomeration centre and does not rely for its success on the additional characteristics of recentralization for measured success, such as walkability or nearness to residential housing. The location choices of the firms in the Burnside Complex do not appear to take recentralization criteria into their internal deliberations.

And how do these forces impact the smart growth principles at a city scale? The Burnside Complex competes against mixed use across the region as well as against the central business district, the latter despite almost a decade's worth of political and economic focus. Planner P2M noted that from a planning and political context that the tension between core and periphery commercial development is unresolved and may, in the long run, favour the business park format, especially given the mass vacancies projected for the downtown core despite heavy private sector investment enabled by municipal planning.

Trying to reconcile business parks with smart growth revealed limited academic writing on the subject. Recentralization is predicated on an emerging, post-industrial economy whereby commercial and residential uses are compatible neighbours. The Burnside Complex shows that insurers, with their benign office presence, will relocate alongside their business customers as a form of economic efficiency, and that long-haul trucking serving the booming delivery-centric online commerce market will go 24/7 with backup alerts and floodlights going all night long as business demands. Electricians still need vans to haul their tools and supplies across a cityscape, and secure warehouses to lock it up at night. The Burnside Complex hosts a pharmacological distribution centre, located down the street from a lumber yard, not far from a heavy welding operation and forge, which itself is near the main regional distributor for exercise equipment used in schools and recreation centres. All these enterprises require space—much of it horizontal—to operate efficiently in a modern economy.

My literature review found little discussion of what to do with business models and physical processes that did not fit into the prescriptive meaning of smart growth's anticipated post-industrial spatial organization. At least in Halifax, the Burnside Complex's agglomeration does not favour recentralization, but does complement what may be an efficient, even necessary, clustering of firms to the exclusion of residential accessibility save by car. Smart growth and its recentralization strategy have yet to accommodate the organizational demands of firms currently located within the Burnside Complex.

CASE STUDY FOUR

Boscobel

Boscobel is a small, new development within the HRM and is an example of an "executive" subdivision developed within an established, suburban residential zone. Boscobel is evidence of market ambivalence towards the planning consensus of smart growth. It demonstrates that dispersion's legacy continues by way of grandfathered development rights and supporting legal infrastructure.

Boscobel came about from a development agreement with as-of-right prerogatives embedded in the documents reaching back to the 1980s. These rights continued with the property when it was sold to a developer in the mid-2000s. They were originally premised on building up to twelve detached homes, in character with the local neighbourhood of winding country-like roads reaching down to the seashore, then

winding back up again. The curves of the road would go around established groves of



The Boscobel demonstration home has the high-end standard double garage, pseudo-rock facing, mansion-style gables, over-height entry, deep setback, stainless steel appliances, granite countertops, porcelain floors, more than three bathrooms, and considerable floorspace.

trees and houses are set amongst rocky gullies. The area is resolutely suburban and dispersed. This is not included as a growth centre in the Halifax regional plan; it is not a “dot on the map”.

At only 23 homes now proposed on the subdivided land, Boscobel makes only a slight dent in the overall suburban morphology. This is a greenfield development on what is technically an infill site, as the area is surrounded by already developed land.

Instead of embracing the smart growth ethos, and some of the recentralization characteristics, Boscobel does the opposite. It is designed as an exclusive community of high-income residents who can both afford and prefer spacious housing. Within the development there is no attempt at mixed use. Walkability is confined to chic walking trails, and there is no transit service. With multi-car garages the norm the neighbourhood is unlikely to ever see transit demand.

As a low-density subdivision, Boscobel implies the managerial class can avoid Halifax densification policies. Boscobel is not unique, however. Developments like these persist in Halifax (there are similar examples in Fall River, Spider Lake, and Hammonds Plains subdivisions) signaling that the smart growth consensus model of planning has not reached into the mindset of many developers, and the consumers of



The faux gate and bold name of the subdivision attempts to convey stylish exclusivity. In addition to the sidewalk, the white picket signpost points to a private, rustic path for residents that connects to trails to the waterfront. Note the solar panels on the roof of the house in the background.

these types of properties. There are numerous grandfathered development prospects like this throughout the Halifax region, each with the potential to siphon investment from the smart growth, denser, more connected vision of the city.

Developments like Boscobel reveal that densification is not a universal public policy, but is constrained by class interests and by old development decisions. The capacity to opt out of the planning consensus indicates that the Halifax land use agenda, largely premised on the cost-savings of smart growth and recentralization, is nevertheless unable to react to the parallel private market when housing for the “executive” class is at stake and developers move to satisfy that demand.

“Density by dispersion”

In the same way that 26 growth centres dilutes the public agenda towards smart growth principles, allowing low-density infill projects such as Boscobel competes with the concept of recentralization and the over-arching smart growth agenda.

CASE STUDY FIVE

Seapoint at Wright's Cove

One of Halifax's newest developments is along the Dartmouth waterfront against the Bedford Basin at Wright's Cove. Marketing by the developer calls the project Seapoint at Harbour Isle, poetic license qualified by its location beside the Dartmouth Marina.

Seapoint is comparable to Boscobel. Both are luxury developments close to the seashore; both are suburban, being about equal distance from the regional centre. Similarly, their tenure is based on ownership, with Boscobel being freehold and Seapoint condominium. And each came into being via a development agreement with the city, unique to each project and its land use. The difference is in their site specifics and building forms. Whereas Boscobel demonstrates no traits related to recentralization criteria, Seapoint at least attempts to satisfy that ethos. However, in doing so, Seapoint may be the type of development that undermines progress towards the overall smart growth effort in Halifax.



A lone tower surrounded by modern townhouses with courtyard and underground parking, this is the Hazelton building, first of (supposedly) up to eight more structures at Wright's Cove. Sales, however, have been slow.

Seapoint's location and history are largely to blame. The development came about after more than a decade of planning by the city proved inconclusive as to the highest and best uses of the land, which was low-lying and not well suited to industrial use. A default to the "market" was advised when no consensus could be reached as to the "right" policy objectives (Cantwell Report, 2006, p. 111). Residential and mixed-use (residential and commercial) were permitted when other possible uses were not.

Technically this residential property is in the Burnside Complex. Without the development agreement, the area would be governed by the industrial park By-laws and regulations. A 2006 study by the Cantwell & Company consulting firm considered turning the area into a container port or bulk shipping facility, but the market demand was not there. Furthermore, that part of the harbour was much too shallow for natural passage, and in any case, the Federal government prohibits nearshore dredging. Halifax and Nova Scotia have limited export potential for bulk goods (there is a very small gypsum shipping terminal a kilometre away), so that, too, was ruled non-viable. The location is bound to the north by National Defence land, used for the Canadian Navy's munition storage: that is an area inviolate and autonomous from a planning perspective, limiting expansion. The consultants looked at turning the space into parkland, but the site is isolated from most residential communities, so it would have to be a car-access only park, and in any case, trails would be very short due to incompatible uses on either side. They looked at hotel potential as anything waterfront usually puts that idea on the table.

Wright's Cove had been devastated by the 1917 Halifax Explosion and again by a 1945 ammunition barge exploding leading to a mass evacuation of residents for kilometres around. The area has a scattering of residential structures nearby, pre-dating the Burnside Complex and isolated by the nearby roads turned into major commercial arteries, commuting byways, and truck routes. The Seapoint site does not connect to nearby residential, being bounded by the existing marina slippage and other shoreline impediments. The Cantwell report expressed concern that the area is predominantly industrial and commercial so adding a residential mix (especially for children) could open the door for future conflict. Despite this, and due in some part to



After two years, there were no tenants for the mixed use commercial space.

pressure from the private landowner to assign a viable purpose, the area was designated a mixed use residential area and construction began. As for the success of the development and its integration in a city with a smart growth agenda, the way the development unfolded raises questions as to the soundness of the decision.

As with Boscobel and Dartmouth Crossing, Seapoint had no “dot on the

map” assignation in the 2006 regional plan, so it is an outlier to the growth centre strategy, another siphoning of demand. While the developer’s artistic conceptualization of the development is ambitious with up to 10 tower buildings and



The full concept, including hotel and office space plus ground-level retail.

dozens of townhouses, plus an expanded marina with small waterfront hotel, the project as it stands now falls short of the vision.

The condominium units have not sold well, and despite being almost two years on the market the building is partially empty. The mandatory ground level retail is unoccupied. Due to the slowness of sales no secondary construction has begun. The only other facilities on that side of the thoroughfare are a Starbucks and a Pita Pit convenience restaurant, separated from the actual Seapoint complex by a massive drainage ditch and chain link fencing. This is hardly a complete community and not a walkable, convivial streetscape. At night, despite lighting, the site is very isolated and the sound of large truck airbrakes reverberates off the water. Overall the site does not appear “smart”, and one suspects that this building is the trial, and to proceed further along this path might be the error.

Seapoint qualifies as infill development and, though the residences themselves would be dense, the location is isolated. The long-term regional growth population projections cannot support such a vision. The distances from any grocery or viable shopping means these are reachable only by automobile. Surrounded on three sides by an industrial park, Seapoint is isolated as a residential structure. One would be hard pressed to label it a community even in the most generous sense of the word.

In low-growth Halifax, Seapoint presents a dilemma, particularly to the recentralization strategy focussed on the regional centre. Market leakage is a contributor to decentralization despite a multi-unit tower and relatively dense townhouse accompaniment. With virtually no supporting municipal or social infrastructure—not close to a recreation centre or library or school—nor a mass of people large enough support even a grocery store, there is little to walk to and a distinct necessity to own a car. Halifax transit planners did say that a transit hub may be going into the area, but they were not there yet and no timeline was pending (T2F). This is the type of development transit officials interviewed dislike because it creates a small demand (or at the least the perception of demand) in an area not already recognized as a major service corridor.

If enough developments like Seapoint continue within the Halifax catchment, small and unplanned nodes like this could play havoc with the concept of recentralization.

Building form alone cannot create connectedness and that the semblance of densification: in this case a higher density building can co-exist with, and even enable, dispersion. The mixed-use language in the enabling plan and Cantwell report cannot be said to represent what has occurred on the site by 2016. Seapoint demonstrates the difficulty in the partial application of recentralization criteria, whereby picking only select elements—in this case a dense form with mixed use—may not achieve broader ambitions.

CONCLUSION

The potential for Halifax to foster suburban recentralization appears limited. The barriers to recentralization are evident in the case studies: they vary from the quirks of local topography, to overly ambitious planning practices, to the limited influence land-use planning can assert over market forces. Halifax's slow growth rates, both economic and demographic, are a challenge in themselves, made more difficult by changing planning regimes and parochial politics. Developers and affluent homebuyers seem ambivalent towards the consensus in planning towards smart growth principles. Without buy-in from the market sector recentralization cannot succeed. The spatial needs of commerce and the efficiency of the business park's agglomeration model contrast with large-scale office vacancies looming in the downtown core. New suburbs are definitively sprawling, abetted by the lingering effects of long-gone glaciers, and consumer preference for low-rise housing amongst the greenbelts. Each case study takes a sample of the Halifax broader morphology and puts it under the microscope. Perhaps a future, more thorough investigation may open new possibilities for improved suburban sustainability to resolve the dilemma of dispersion.

I am not suggesting that Halifax is dysfunctional and a lost cause at redeeming the urban form when it comes to sustainability through the smart growth ethos and recentralization strategy. The focus on the planning a better regional centre is the appropriate place for Halifax to begin. Changing the character of the suburbs, however, may have to wait until growth forces the city to expand in a different way.

In part, the problem may lie in the Maslow's Hammer abstraction of the recentralization principles, turning every geography or market structure into a nail awaiting the only tool in the belt, that of smart growth. As of this writing Halifax does not suffer from excessive price pressure in housing noted in Toronto and Vancouver where recentralization policies are now implicated in the residential affordability crisis (Tuckey, 2016). It is difficult to find a traffic jam in Halifax, save over the bridges at rush hour, and those clear up reasonably quickly. Perhaps the urgency of recentralization applied to the suburbs is a model of restructuring and urban repair most suited to a large metropolis. Halifax is not there yet, and may never reach that point.

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