Halifax Regional Municipality: Residents' perspectives on the suburbs

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Trends in the Suburbs
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Introduction

While planning theory provides producers of new suburban communities with a rationale for developing particular forms and features, little research has considered the perspectives of the consumers of these developments – the residents. In 2011, researchers at Dalhousie University interviewed planners, developers and elected officials in Halifax Regional Municipality to explore local and national development trends through the lens of their involvement in the planning process (Craswell 2011). In 2012, researchers extended the study to look more closely at why people move to suburban communities and the features that make suburban living attractive.

This *Working Paper* presents preliminary findings from resident interviews conducted in new suburban communities of Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) in the summer of 2012. During in-person, semi-structured interviews, respondents were asked about the features of their neighbourhoods and their views of development trends at home and across Canada. Questions focused on four main themes: the physical features of the suburb, social characteristics and social interaction among residents, travel behaviour of residents, and suburban growth and development trends at home and across Canada. This paper presents key themes emerging from the interviews, supplemented by field survey information and census data.

This research forms part of an ongoing study for Dalhousie University's "Trends in the Suburbs" project, led by Dr Jill Grant in the School of Planning. The study investigates development trends in suburban residential neighbourhoods across Canada. Previous investigations examined communities in Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia.
The research also received support from The City Institute at York University's project on "Global Suburbanisms: Governance, Land and Infrastructure in the 21st Century". This project, led by Dr Roger Keil, examines suburbs in international perspective.

Figure 1: New developments in Halifax suburbs

Population and Growth Patterns

Census Update

Table 1 shows that the proportion of the total Nova Scotia population living in HRM has steadily increased since 1970s. The population of HRM grew 4.7% to 390,328 residents in 2011 from 372,810 in 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2012d). Growth occurred more quickly than during the period 2001 to 2006, during which population grew 3.8%. Despite a slightly higher growth rate, the HRM population failed to meet the projected population of 408,200 (Statistics Canada, 2012c).

**Table 1: Population 1976 – 2011, Halifax Regional Municipality and Nova Scotia**

	HRM	Nova Scotia	Proportion of Nova Scotia population residing in HRM
1976	278,500	828,570	33.6%
1981	288,100	847,442	34.0%
1986	306,400	873,175	35.1%
1991	330,900	899,942	36.8%
1996	342,900	909,282	37.7%
2001	359,090	908,007	39.5%
2006	372,679	913,462	40.8%
2011	390,328	921,727	42.3%

Source: Altus Group Economic Consulting, 2009; Statistics Canada, 2007; Statistics Canada, 2012b.

Population pyramids (Figure 2) show the age distribution in HRM and Nova Scotia. The population of HRM continues to be younger than the population of Nova Scotia as a whole. In 2011, the median age of the HRM population was 39.9 years, but 43.7 years in Nova Scotia as a whole. While 16.6% of the Nova Scotia population was over the age of 65, in HRM only 13.1% were in that age range. In Nova Scotia 17.7% of the population fell between the ages of 20 and 34 years, but Halifax had 21.9% of the population aged between 20 and 34 (Statistics Canada, 2012b). Nationally, 14.8% of residents are over the age of 65, with 19.5% of residents aged between 20 and 34 (Statistics Canada, 2012a).

Figure 2: Population pyramids for HRM and Nova Scotia, 2011

**Halifax Regional Municipality CSD, 2011 Census (Statistics Canada, 2012)**
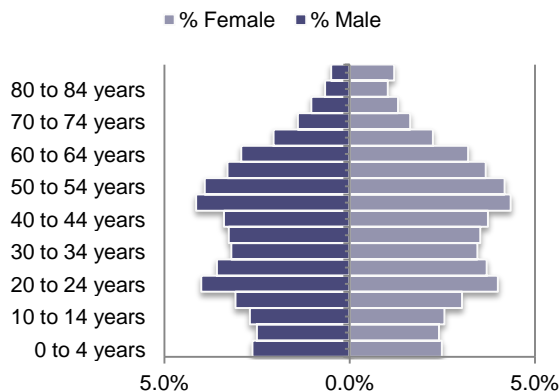
Nova Scotia, 2011 Census (Statistics Canada, 2012)

3
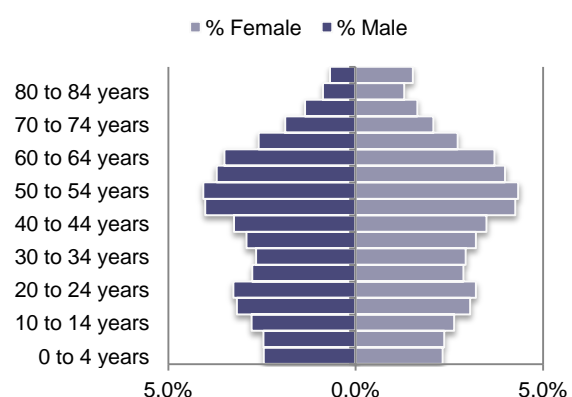
Recent Suburban Growth Patterns

With a land area of about 5,500 square kilometres, and diverse settlement types that included villages and rural districts, overall population density for HRM remains low. The 2011 Census reported an increase of overall population density of 71.1 persons per square kilometre from 67.8 persons per square kilometre in 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2007; 2012b). The urban core of the Halifax Peninsula and parts of central Dartmouth remain the most densely populated; however, as shown Figure 3, suburban areas of mainland Halifax, Bedford and Sackville also show pockets of densely populated areas.

Figure 3: Population density
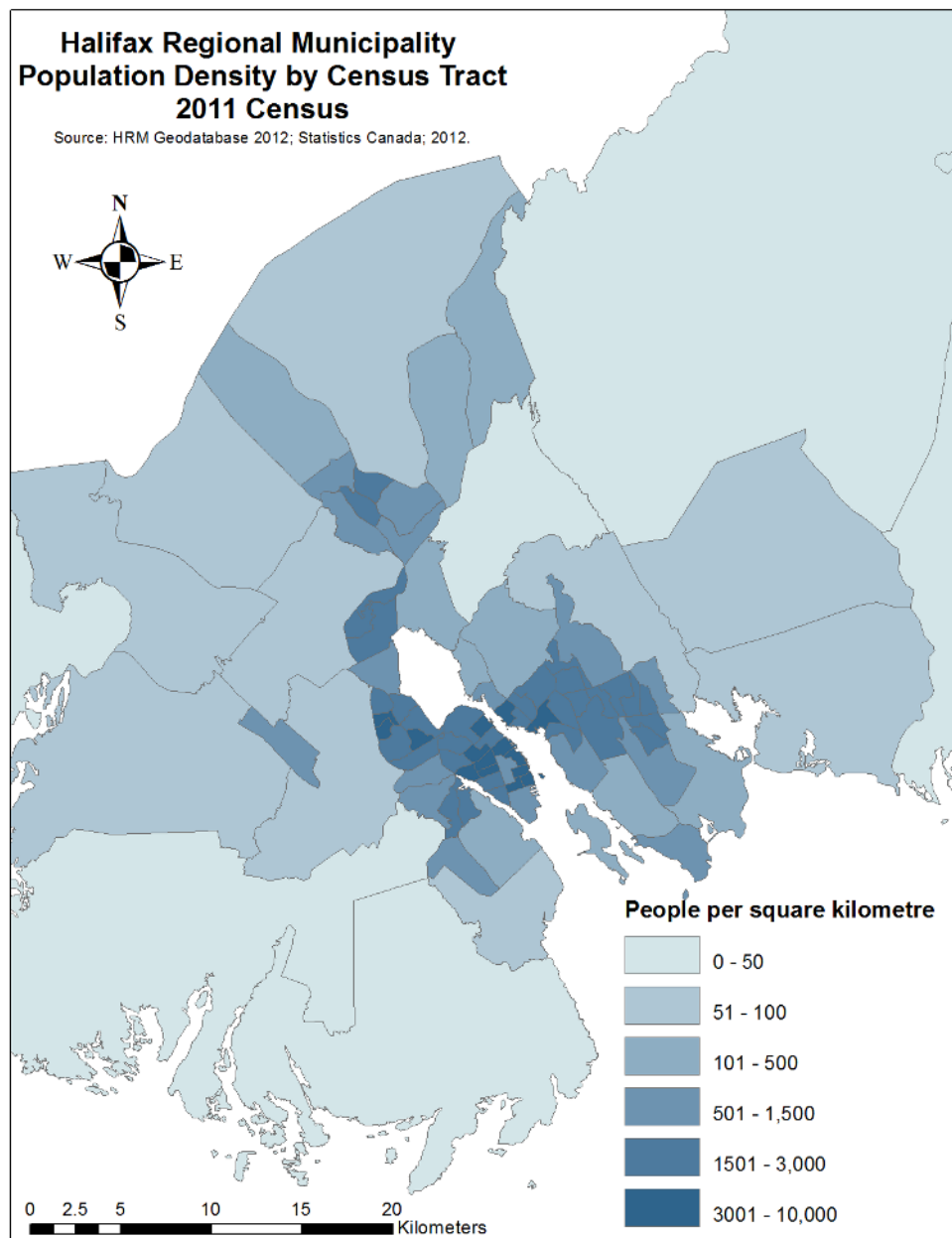
In 2006, HRM adopted the Regional Municipal Planning Strategy (Regional Plan). This plan classified areas of the municipality into four main categories of settlement areas: The Urban Core or Regional Centre, Suburbs, Rural Commutershed, and Rural. As shown in Figure 4, the plan recognized that as the population of the Regional Centre declined, population in suburban areas increased significantly. Growth outside of the Regional Centre has increased infrastructure and delivery costs for servicing (Halifax Regional Municipality, 2006, p. 6). As a method of managing growth and controlling such costs, the Regional Plan set targets to try to accommodate 25% of new residential development in the Regional Centre, 25% in rural areas, and 50% in suburban areas (Halifax Regional Municipality, 2006).

Figure 4: Settlement areas in Regional Plan
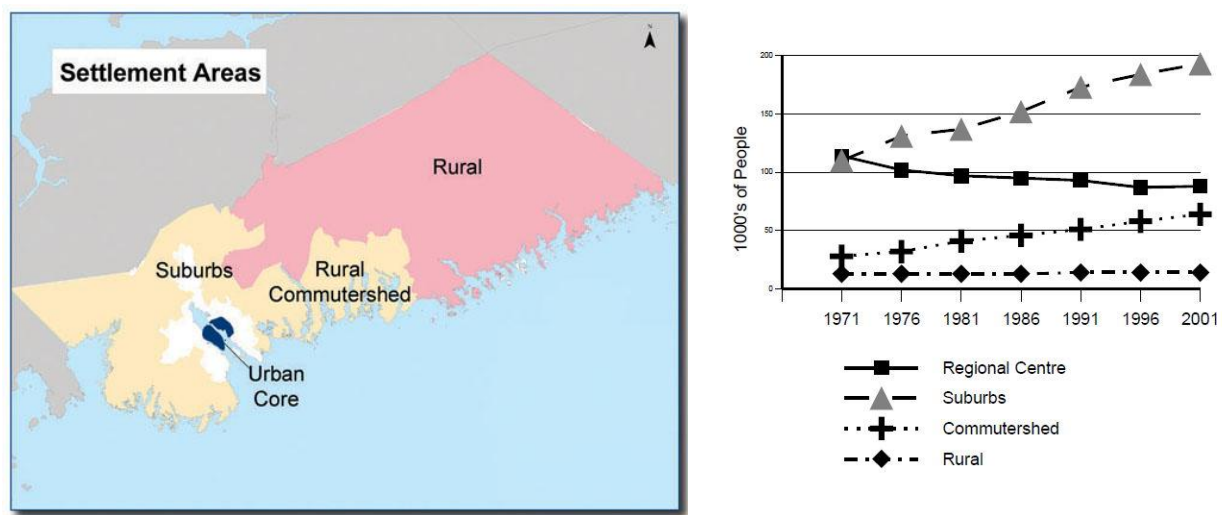
Source: Halifax Regional Municipality, 2006.

Figure 5:
Residential Growth Targets 2006 – 2012
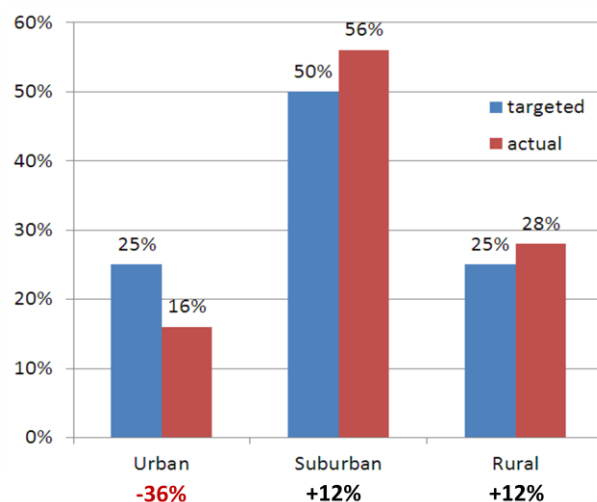
Source: Halifax Regional Municipality, 2012.

Analysis for the Regional Plan 5 Year Review indicated that since the Regional Plan was adopted, new residential growth has surpassed targets in suburban and rural areas and fallen short of targets for growth in the Regional Centre. Figure 5 shows residential growth relative to the Regional Plan targets. Suburban and rural growth was 12% higher than targeted, while development in the Regional Centre was 36% lower than hoped (Halifax Regional Municipality, 2012). In other words, the suburbs continue to grow more quickly than planned.

Figure 6 shows population increases in the suburban and rural commuter areas of HRM. Census Tracts in the urban core of the Halifax Peninsula and parts of central Dartmouth show stable or small increases. Areas such as mainland Halifax, Bedford and Dartmouth outside the downtown area have grown significantly, with a 50% increase in the Rockingham-Wentworth area of Halifax.

Figure 6: Population change
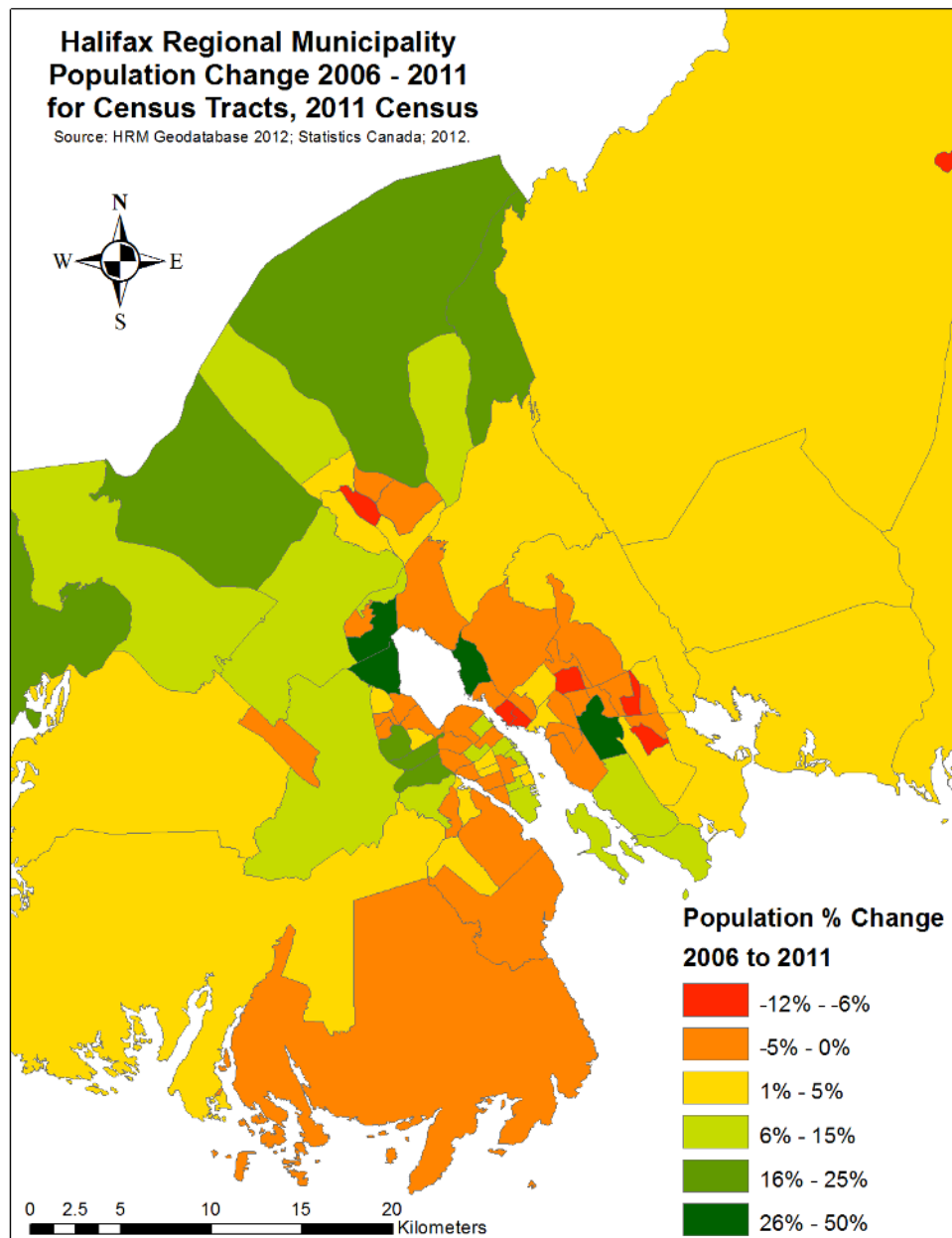
Figure 7 shows the proportion of private occupied dwellings constructed since 1996. In Bedford, Hammonds Plains, parts of mainland Halifax, Eastern Passage, and Dartmouth outside of the Regional Centre, a large proportion of the private occupied dwellings are newly constructed. As expected, older parts of the city like the Halifax Peninsula and central Dartmouth have proportionally fewer newly constructed homes in the overall housing stock.

Figure 7: Proportion of new dwellings in housing stock
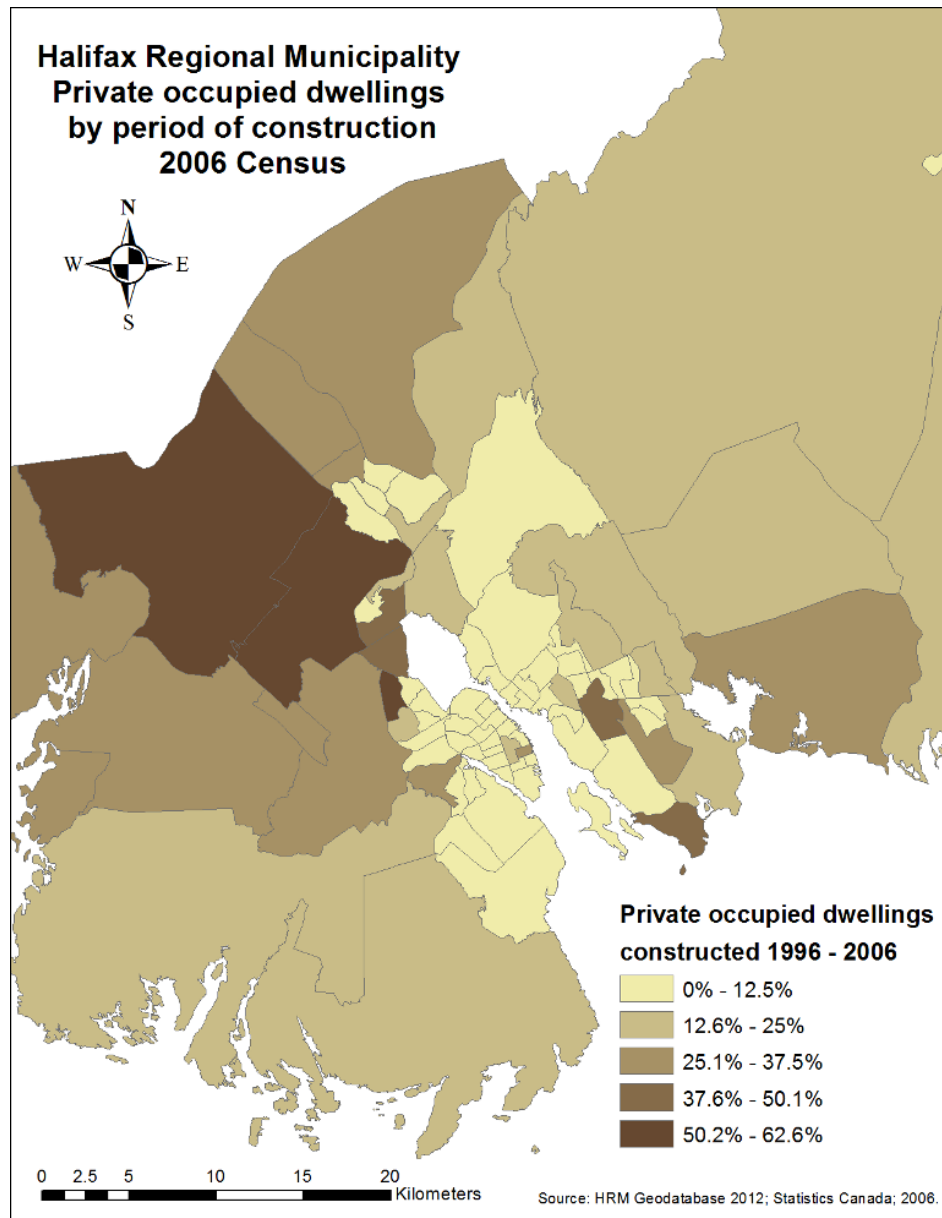
Results of Field Research

Many residents are choosing to live in suburban communities despite the priorities of the Regional Plan to encourage growth closer to the core. To understand these choices, in-person, semi-structured interviews with were conducted with four suburban HRM residents in Summer 2011 and 17 suburban HRM residents in Summer 2012. Recruiting interview subjects involved a convenience sample: residents were chosen for their willingness to participate, rather than randomly sampled. Interview subjects were recruited through flyers distributed in target neighbourhoods and through known contacts living in those areas. In 2012, the researcher targeted two inner ring suburbs built within the last ten years. One neighbourhood included an obvious mix of housing types at various price points, while the other included some mix but seemed more homogeneous in housing type and price. As contacting residents from these areas proved challenging, the researcher subsequently targeted a third new subdivision, chosen primarily due to previous contacts in the area. In each neighbourhood, flyers were distributed on doorsteps and posted on community mailboxes, with instructions to contact the researchers for further information. In several cases, respondents provided additional contacts to refer researchers to willing participants in the neighbourhoods.

Of 21 total respondents, 19 were residents of HRM subdivisions constructed within the past ten years, with 20 respondents residing outside of the Regional Centre (Table 2). The use of a convenience sample limited the diversity of respondents. Males are underrepresented, as are renters and low income residents. Retired residents are overrepresented, with few young families interviewed. Respondents resided in a range of housing types, with single detached housing the most common form of housing among the sample. Despite the number dwelling units in townhouses and apartments available in new suburban communities, few respondents resided in these housing types.

Table 2: Age and Sex of Respondents

	>30 years	30 – 55 years	55 + years	Total
Male	0	3	3	6
Female	1	5	9	15
Total	**1**	**8**	**12**	**21**

Figure 8: Housing Tenure of Respondents

- Rent
- Freehold ownership
- Condominium ownership
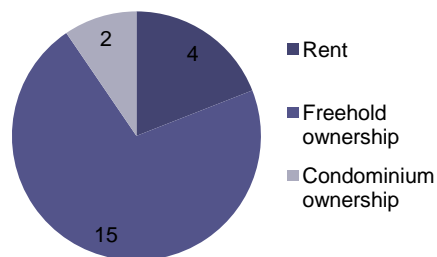
Figure 9: Housing Type by Number of Respondents

Single detached **(11)**

Semi detached **(2)**

Townhouse **(2)**

Apartment **(5)**

Neighbourhood Features and Physical Characteristics

Figure10: Multi-family dwellings
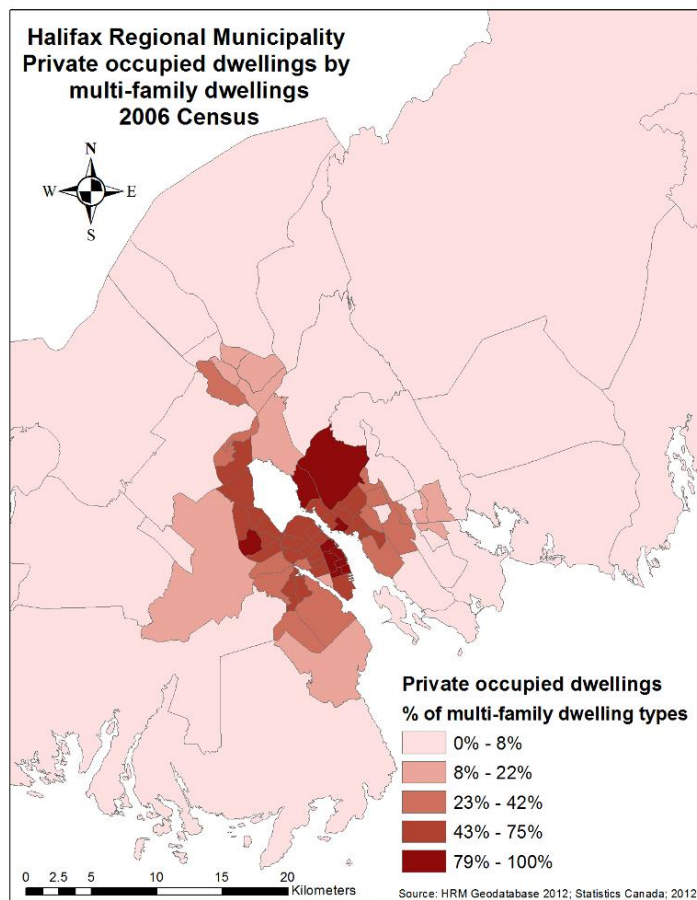
Mixed Housing Types

Field surveys conducted in May and June 2012 revealed that while single detached dwellings remain the dominant form of development in new HRM suburban communities, recent developments have incorporated a range of housing types within neighbourhoods. Master planned communities are often required by municipal secondary planning strategies and development agreements to include a range of housing types at various price points. Figure 10 indicates the form of residential development present in urban and suburban areas. While the Halifax Peninsula and central and north end Dartmouth have high proportions of multi-family dwellings, suburban areas of Bedford and mainland Halifax also have a high proportion of these dwelling types.

Figure 11: Multi-family housing (apartments and townhomes) are common in suburban neighbourhoods.

"I think the whole idea of mixed use [is a new development trend]. Of having apartment buildings and condos and, you know, single family homes as well as semi-detached homes, I think that seems to be relatively new. And I see it popping up in a number of areas." (H11R3F)

"Condos are huge. I don't ever remember growing up and hearing the word condo. But now everything is condo, condo, condo." (H12R11F)

"[Y]ou look at this neighbourhood and how many apartment buildings we have. And most of them are rentals. There's a couple of condo buildings. But in the end, you know, you have a lot of people which generates a lot of traffic." (H12R13F)

Single detached homes are rarely adjacent to multi-family dwellings; however, in a few locations, these transitions are made through the use of similar buildings materials.

Many respondents found it difficult to identify trends outside of their own neighbourhoods. Most respondents were able to identify the best and worst features in their own neighbourhoods, but were less comfortable describing the form of development, especially in relation to other subdivisions in the city.

Most respondents were the first occupants of their homes, and moved into their neighbourhoods during the construction phase. As a result, some residents reflected on neighbourhood change through subsequent development. Respondents spoke often of the growth of condominium and apartment-style developments. A few residents were not satisfied with the perceived increase in traffic congestion resulting from the construction of these developments.

Condominiums and rental apartment complexes are frequently located on arterial roads of major developments, with single detached and townhomes built on local streets. In a few new master planned communities, condominium buildings are located furthest from the entrance to the subdivision. One resident commented that the higher density development at the rear of their neighbourhood was hidden by single and semi-detached housing, which they felt was more aesthetically appealing than neighbourhoods with

high density development at the entrance.

In general, although several housing types can be found in the same subdivision, these are most often located in groups or pods of similar housing types. For example, streets with single detached housing rarely incorporate townhouses or condominiums within the same street or block. More commonly, semi-detached units and townhouses are located within the same block. Single detached homes on small to medium sized lots often back on to townhouses or semi-detached homes. Large single detached homes with high price points are likely to be located on cul-de-sacs, and often back onto trails or preserved open space.

Mixed Housing Styles

"The houses on my street are all kind of one and the same. You probably noticed that they look a little bit cookie cutter. And the next circle down is also cookie cutter. I think it's still an appealing cul-de-sac. I think the houses have nice curb appeal. Would it be nice if there were some with some different layouts? It could be neat because, you know, it's kind of boring when you stand out on the back lawn here and you look down past all these houses. They all look the same on the back." (H12R6F)

"They must pick a house design and everything and then have it built. And next door, there might be a big empty lot, a big hole in the ground. And maybe months later, somebody comes along and they want a house there. And it's a different looking house. You end up with streets that look great because they're all different houses, different house designs." (H12R2AM)

"The houses are closer and most of them look the same. When I come here, you know, I still miss my house. Most of the houses look the same. I have to look at my driveway to see my car." (H12R4AM).

New residential subdivisions from the same developers tend to use similar housing styles, resulting in visually similar neighbourhoods. Typically, new home buyers choose from a range of permitted housing styles and building materials. House frontages include a mixture of vinyl siding, and brick or stone facades. In areas of mixed housing types, these building materials are used to unite the styles of housing.

Residents were divided in their opinion of the aesthetic character of their neighbourhoods. Respondents from the same neighbourhoods separately described the homes in their areas as typically suburban, "cookie cutter" style development, while a few respondents pointed to the variety of housing types and building materials as important features that they liked about their neighbourhoods. In general, those respondents living in areas with marked differences in housing styles were satisfied with these differences.

A mix of building materials provides visual variety in suburban neighbourhoods.

Amenities: Retail, Recreation and Open Space

Respondents noted a trend of retail plazas in new suburban areas. Most respondents described the grocery stores, services and amenities provided in these retail areas as positive features of their neighbourhoods. Few respondents stated that they had moved to the neighbourhood because of the amenities provided; rather, they were pleased when the stores were constructed and opened after they had moved in.

Bike lanes and sidewalks are sometimes provided; however the dominant landscape is car-oriented.

Small retail plazas include large parking lots for local shops and services.

"I can get to the [Highway] 102 to get to the highway very, very quickly. So that way I'm situated really well. To gain access to all of the amenities in a car, I'm literally a 3-minute drive to all of that. So that way it's pretty good." (H11R2M)

"The amenities are outstanding. And just access to the greenbelt that's there. It just makes it so attractive. You feel like you're in the city but you also have, you know, some very designated green space. And we really like that. And knowing that no one is going to be building there and knowing that that's going to be our backyard for a while, we hope, then that's definitely an attractive thing when you're buying for the long term." (H12R8F).

New suburban neighbourhoods surveyed in HRM included similar shops and services. Most new master planned communities have access to public transportation on existing or expanded bus routes. Bus routes commonly serve neighbourhoods by providing stops on major peripheral streets. Mixed use or retail plazas are located nearby, providing residents access to grocery stores, drug stores, fitness centres and banks. While these retail areas are intended to supply the local neighbourhoods and provide some access for pedestrians via sidewalks and, in some cases, bike routes, the retail areas are car-oriented with minimal connectivity for non-car users. As new suburban areas are frequently located on the periphery of the city, connections to existing major highways are common. Some respondents mentioned these highway access points as positive features of their neighbourhoods, as they allowed easy access from homes to other parts of the city.

"I keep talking about the playgrounds but I do think that there's a number of them within, you know, a very small space. I'm trying to think, there's at least 5 that are within walking distance of my house. So that's a really great resource for families in my demographic. And it also has the walking trail with the... It's sort of surrounded by a greenbelt. So that's nice that there's some exposure to nature available even though you're out in the suburbs." (H11R3F)

"There was supposed to be a full park at the end of our street. And so far they've just put grass there and that's it. They haven't been able to do much else with it." (H11R5F)

"There does seem to be walking trails that you can access, which is nice. They've left lots of trees around when they were developing it." (H12R12F)

Recreational amenities, such as walking trails and children's playgrounds are commonly included in new residential subdivisions. Most respondents noted sidewalks and walking trails as important features of their neighbourhoods. One resident from a neighbourhood without sidewalks said the lack of sidewalks was a negative feature of the area. A few respondents felt that connections from their neighbourhoods to the nearby parks and open spaces were lacking. Although recreational amenities were often mentioned by respondents as positive features of their neighbourhoods, some respondents felt that these amenities were not of a high quality and were not maintained over time. Two respondents recognized that limited maintenance may be due to the ongoing construction and growth of their neighbourhoods, while one respondent suggested that developers have no need to ensure upkeep of facilities once their developments have sold. Views about neighbourhood landscaping varied, with many feeling that more open space, street trees, and trees between properties should have been left during development, while a few suggested that the developers made an effort to preserve trees and open space.

Small children's playgrounds are often provided by developers for use by suburban residents.

Walking trails and open space provided by developers were criticized for lack of maintenance.

Neighbourhood Choice and Growth

Field surveys and interview participants indicated that suburban areas of HRM are experiencing a period of growth. When asked to characterize the rate of growth in HRM, respondents frequently mentioned a high volume of rental apartments and condominium-style apartments under construction in their neighbourhoods. While a few respondents worried that the construction would lead to an oversupply of housing, many respondents marvelled at the amount of growth in their areas. Respondents wondered: "***Where are all these people coming from?"***

"My experience here is that we wonder where all the people are coming from and why they need so many houses. It just seems to be growing like crazy. And I mean the apartment buildings that are going up here, it's like crazy. Three huge ones just since we've moved here, and another one looks like they're just starting…You know, where are all the people coming from?" (H12R14F)

"I find there's a lot of housing development. I don't see a great deal of need for it. I think there's a lot of anticipatory sort of development going on. I think there's a perceived explosion that people think is going to occur with the shipbuilding contract. I think it's shot the prices of housing up unrealistically. So I think in anticipation of that, I think there's a lot of developers that are developing." (H12R8F)

Residents view apartment construction in their neighbourhoods as signs of growth.

Given the amount of ongoing construction, field surveys indicate that many people continue to choose to live in suburban communities. Interview participants were asked about their reasons for choosing to live in their neighbourhoods: responses can be classified into push factors and pull factors.

Push factors encourage residents to move to new homes or neighbourhoods for reasons other than the neighbourhood itself. These factors focus primarily on changes in the life cycle. Residents may downsize to smaller homes as they age, due to a desire for limited maintenance,

"We're getting up in years and maintaining the yard was very difficult, and the shovelling. We had an 80 foot driveway on a steep hill...So it didn't meet our needs too well anymore. My husband was retiring and we decided it was time to do something." (H12R14F)

"We wanted a new house. I think that that was the primary criterion, if you will. We didn't want to be saddled with a 20-year old house with repairs." (H12R3)

"We wanted something that was fairly new development. We weren't interested ourselves in buying an older home. We wanted something that was move-in ready. And that whole area being so new, it was an attractive area for that purpose." (H12R8)

"We decided that we wanted to live in a condo after owning several houses in our lifetime. At this point in our life, it was a good choice because we don't have to worry about snow ploughing and grass. And it's a very convenient area to live in…We're very close to shopping and the movie theatres and good restaurants. Several libraries are very close to us, which we like to use. And we're also close enough to downtown for concerts and theatre productions and also good restaurants and entertainment." (H12R2BF)

"I'd have to say price was the number one. You know, the houses were very attractively priced basically, and it was a new development so I got to choose the style of house and the actual lot as well. And I found that attractive. And it wasn't far, you know, it <u>was</u> suburban but it was still not too far away from the city, and there were bus routes available and that kind of thing" (H11R24M)

or upsize to larger homes as families grow. Six respondents interviewed had downsized into smaller homes, while four respondents had upsized as their families grew. Older respondents downsized into condominiums, apartments or townhouses, sometimes rentals, in order to minimize the amount of maintenance that is required of an older single detached home. Growing families moved from apartments to single detached or semi-detached housing.

Pull factors are features of the home or neighbourhood that attracted new residents, and include personal connections to the area, new home construction, and the amenities provided nearby. Most commonly, respondents chose to move to new suburban areas because of a desire for new construction and the proximity to amenities such as grocery stores, highway connections, green and open spaces. Eight respondents stated that they were interested in living in new homes, with five mentioning affordable prices as important factors in their decision-making. New homes were perceived to require fewer repairs and less ongoing maintenance. Two respondents mentioned R-2000 home construction as attractive features for new home purchases, with one respondent noting this as a primary reason for choosing a particular area in which to live. One respondent said that the cost of buying a new home was similar to purchasing an older home in an established neighbourhood. Eight respondents mentioned the amenities of the area, including proximity to work and school, bus routes and retail establishments. Five respondents had personal connections to the area, commonly moving from within the same area of the municipality.

Many respondents described both push and pull factors for why they chose to move, and why they selected their particular subdivisions. For example, several respondents downsized to limit the amount of maintenance required on their homes while they picked neighbourhoods for the amenities available.

Sustainable communities: Jobs and mixed use in the suburbs

"Maybe new jobs have to be created to improve the suburban development. Maybe new industry, new companies to be developed in suburban areas to accommodate the people that live in the suburbs so they don't have to all travel to the city... Maybe if the companies were diversified in different areas, in the suburbs, then it would be much easier for people to find work and so they don't have to travel and waste time."
(H12R4AM)

"There seems to be a development going on up here, and that seems that it will likely meet most of the needs of this community... So I'm glad that that's there because at my age, I don't want to have to travel very far... I like to go to one spot and be able to do the other things."
(H12R7F)

"You know, it's a matter of distance from the urban core and connectedness to the urban core. I think that we need to put greater thought into walkable communities and accessibility of amenities for all ages. Yes, I mean that's the way we have to move, in that direction." (H11R3F)

Many respondents were unsure or did not feel confident in answering the question "What do you see as the long term challenges to planning and developing sustainable communities?" Few respondents discussed environmental aspects of sustainability, although one respondent spoke of concern for water and air pollution, and a few respondents mentioned loss of open space and vegetation as key concerns of suburban growth.

While the idea of environmentally sustainable communities was mentioned by only a few respondents, some suggested ideas of developing mixed use or complete communities. A few respondents noted the lack of access to jobs within suburban areas as something that prevents the suburbs from thriving or becoming sustainable. Most respondents said that access to amenities such as grocery stores, doctors, pharmacies, banks and fitness centres allows their neighbourhoods to be self-sufficient, with at least one respondent noting that these amenities contribute to community health. When asked about key concerns for the future of the Canadian suburbs, a few respondents mentioned that transportation and traffic congestion would increase with further development and put pressure on infrastructure.

Transportation

Residents spoke about choosing their modes of transportation in terms of convenience and time. In general, car usage was perceived as more convenient and less time-consuming than public transportation. Many determined neighbourhood suitability by car access. Nearly all respondents drove cars on a regular basis for work and shopping. Only one household did not own a car. Respondents viewed car use as a method to manage their time that is convenient for their lifestyles. A few respondents cited trip-chaining as reasons for needing access to a car. Trip-chaining includes making multiple stops on one trip, such as picking up a child from daycare on the way home from work, or completing multiple errands. Respondents mentioned

"I'd like to see some kind of traffic calming measures. One could argue that parking on both sides of the street signals to drivers to slow down, serving as a traffic calming measure. But I find it a nuisance to manoeuvre around the parked cars. And because of the excessive speed, sometimes you're not always able to park your car behind another vehicle and wait for the motorist to pass. It's almost like you're fighting for the space." (H12R1F)

"It would take me forever to get on a bus. So I don't have a choice. I really and truly don't see how you could live here and not own a vehicle, unless you knew exactly where you were going to go to work and then just shop exactly in the same place all the time. You almost need a car." (H12R9F)

"I do take the bus every once in a while. We have only one car. So most days I take it and drop off both children. But if my husband can take it then I will take the bus in and out, and it's very easy. The bus stop is literally outside my...right across from my driveway at home. And then of course I can just get dropped off downtown. So it's very, very easy for me to do that." (H11R3F)

Many respondents appreciated the bus but did not find it convenient to use.

easy access to the highway from their neighbourhoods as an important or beneficial feature of their subdivisions.

While nearly all respondents owned cars, many respondents described negative issues with car usage in their neighbourhoods. A few residents spoke of issues with on-street parking. Several respondents mentioned traffic congestion on major and local streets and excessive speeds on connector streets as negative aspects of their neighbourhoods. Respondents pointed to nearby highway connections and high density developments to explain traffic congestion and excessive speeding. One respondent mentioned highway noise as an issue, and another spoke of a sound berm provided to act as a barrier for the neighbourhood.

While most respondents noted sidewalks and walking trails as important features of their neighbourhoods, a few complained about the lack of pedestrian connections to areas outside of their neighbourhoods, especially across highly-trafficked roadways. Although walkability in their own neighbourhoods appears to be valued, respondents acknowledged that they use their cars and need access to the highway for connections to other parts of the city.

Residents perceived public transportation as time-consuming and inconvenient. While respondents did not take public transit on a regular basis, most were familiar with the routes available to their neighbourhoods. Opinions on the convenience of public transit varied, with the common response that topography and distance to the stop plays a large part in the accessibility of transit. Respondents did not view public transportation as a viable option when shopping, but a few respondents expressed willingness to take the bus downtown during special events or occasionally to work. Only one respondent took the bus to work on a regular basis.

Healthy Communities

When asked, "To what extent is your neighbourhood a healthy community?", residents typically included some component of physical activity and walkability. While the "healthy community" terminology was not clearly understood by residents, most respondents pointed to physical activities and recreational amenities in the neighbourhood as important for healthy communities. Some respondents felt that residents have a personal responsibility to take advantage of available recreational amenities, such as walking trails and park access. Having a walkable neighbourhood was important to most respondents and they pointed to walking trails and sidewalks as contributing to health in the community. Respondents frequently listed amenities available in their community, but commonly admitted to not using those amenities on a regular basis.

Respondents noted the existence of health amenities, such as walk-in clinics, dentists, pharmacies and fitness centres as contributing to the health of their communities. Schools in the community were mentioned frequently as important components of the neighbourhood and seen to be contributing to the health of the community. Some respondents talked about children walking to school and recreational amenities such as soccer fields available for the broader neighbourhood to use. Several respondents felt there was limited play space for children, while others appreciated children's playgrounds in the area. Some respondents suggested their neighbourhoods lacked social aspects of a healthy community, such as community spirit and social interaction. One respondent noted the absence of sports teams and community centres that prevent the community from coming together in one place.

Visual surveys revealed that outdoor private spaces around new homes are generally small, and often dominated by decks or patios. Many homes in

"It's healthy. I mean there's a lot of physical activity you can do around here. The gym is just up the road. You can bike to the gym. It takes 5 minutes. Or you can walk. It's 20 minutes. There's a new gymnasium too, which is very convenient." (H12R4AM)

"There's a nice path that's in a walkable distance, you know, right through the forest. So that's nice. It's a gravel path and it goes up around a duck pond... They say that you can skate on that pond but we haven't had the opportunity to yet. You know, we just haven't realized when it's been tested for whether it's thick enough and all that kind of thing. So we haven't taken advantage of it but apparently you can." (H11R3F).

"Possibly healthy in terms of, there is access if you have a car, there's easy access to what you need for your health. I mean we're very close to a walk-in clinic. We're close to a dentist, a physiotherapist, a spa, etc. So if you have a car, it's very convenient. Healthy, I suppose, also in terms of we do have a tennis court. So there are opportunities for exercise." (H12R3M)

Most houses have limited yard space.

neighbourhoods of houses had small children's jungle gyms in their yards. Very few respondents spoke about their use of their private yard space. Two respondents did note the small size of their yards in comparison to previous places of residence, with one respondent explaining how their backyard is shared with other neighbourhood children. While landscaping was common, neither the visuals surveys nor the responses from residents indicated that gardens are used for growing food. In general, people seem to have accepted small yards.

Social Characteristics

"There is no room here for lower income families. Because whether you rent or if you try to own a house, it's more expensive than most other areas in the Halifax, in the Metro, because it's new and it's a prime location. So if you rent houses here, it's about 40% more expensive than another area." (H12R4AM)

"Yes, when you look in this neighbourhood though, there wouldn't be any low income people in this neighbourhood. And I'm not even saying poor, I'm just saying even the rent in an apartment building is probably about $1,400 a month. So it would be very difficult selling a low income point for sure in a neighbourhood." (H12R13F)

"I think that the area serves mostly younger families because the prices of the houses are very reasonable and it's a very nice area. There's great access to schools and transportation, and there is access to the park. So it's mostly younger families." (H12R3M)

"I would say this neighbourhood is much more of a mixed bag. Next door to me, I have a Black family and there's several Arab families that are on this same little street. And yet you have all the, you know, I don't know if we call them yuppies but retired. The whole neighbourhood is very mixed ethnically. Which I think is always a good thing." (H12R12F)

Generally, respondents favoured incorporating a mix of different types of housing within the neighbourhood. Most recognized that mixing housing types potentially provides an opportunity for different types of people to live in the same neighbourhood, but some noted that the challenge in providing for a variety of incomes. Although housing types are mixed, residents acknowledged that new suburban neighbourhoods provide housing only for those with higher incomes. One respondent suggested that this is due to high construction costs for new homes in newly subdivided areas. Some respondents discussed potential conflicts between different residents in the neighbourhood who are concerned with property values and appearance in their neighbourhood. A few respondents felt that rental housing presented problems: they perceived renters as potentially taking less care and pride than owners in maintaining their homes. Residents acknowledged a lack of affordable, low income and social housing in their neighbourhoods but did not suggest that type of housing should be incorporated.

Providing a mix of housing types was viewed as beneficial for facilitating an age mix. When asked about the benefits of providing a mix of housing types, a quarter of the respondents mentioned the ability to provide housing for a mix of ages and family types. Very few respondents in the sample were visible minorities, but several respondents observed that their neighbourhoods were diverse or 'multicultural'. Most respondents viewed diversity as a positive attribute of their neighbourhoods, with a few noting that there may be some challenges for social integration.

Social interaction

"Like in our stage in life and people in this building, the majority of them, already have their friends and their families. Most of them are from here or have been away and would have family here. And I don't think they need any new friends. Everybody is very nice to you but you know, that's about as far as it goes. But then at the same token, I wouldn't want somebody knocking on my door every morning either."
(H12R2BF)

"It's quite friendly when you go for a walk down along this waterfront. I'd say it's very friendly down there. But you know, it's not a lot of interaction. I think if you have young children, it's maybe better because you have that excuse to talk to people." (H12R12F)

"It takes time to develop a social characteristic. I mean I had a half a dozen neighbours in at Christmas time for a happy hour, which everyone was thrilled to get the invite. But then since then, you're just a wave. You know, I think it takes a while." (H12R13F)

"One major interaction actually comes through kids. So kids play with other kids, and that's how you get like your friendship being developed. You spend your time. So I would say our backyards are like one big place to develop more interactions. And the second thing is this is our sidewalk so I would say like if you were working in the garden, people are really, really very welcoming and will say hi, hello. Kind of like very formal but just connecting people. So you can get those street level interactions here. So I would say, yes, the most important one is through kids." (H12R15)

To explore the extent to which residents interact with their neighbours, respondents were asked about their involvement in local community activities, and to describe the level of interaction present in their communities. Respondents were shown a map of their subdivisions, asked to define their neighbourhoods, and indicate where they had close friends and acquaintances living nearby.

In these suburban communities, social interaction appeared focused on maintaining a superficial sociality, whereby residents were friendly with one another but did not describe themselves as building close social connections. Most respondents felt that although their neighbourhoods were very friendly, residents tended to keep to themselves. Many respondents described cordial relationships with neighbours, finding that while most were friendly, they did not invite each other into their homes. Several respondents were familiar with their immediate next door neighbours, but unfamiliar with people a few houses away or on the next street.

Respondents spoke often of casual interactions with people on the street, especially while walking with dogs or with children. Most described saying 'hello', but not usually stopping to have a conversation. Children were described as important links between households, with respondents suggesting that neighbours get to know one another as their children play together. Of those respondents who had close friends in the neighbourhood, most had social or family connections beyond living together in the neighbourhood.

Challenges for the future of the suburbs

"So I guess maybe it will fuel more development further away. Because it does seem like the further away you get, the cheaper the houses are. Cheap new houses, I guess. So if you want a nice new house, and you don't have a lot of money, you pay for it in your commute to work, I guess." (H12R11F)

"But I can see over time, especially with the prices the way they are, people not being able to sustain it… You know, someone might lose their job. So you know, there might be as a result of the economy the way that it is, people are going to have to look at ways of reducing expenses. And they may be looking at, you know, living either further out or moving out of the province altogether." (H12R8F)

And I'm wondering whether young people will want all the space that their parents wanted. You know, you go into these massive houses. You walk in and the hallway is grand. And it's total wasted space. It seems it was more of a prestige thing. I don't know whether kids will think that way or not."
(H12R12F)

Some respondents felt that large single detached homes may not be affordable or desirable in the future.

While planners hope to encourage population growth in the Regional Centre, residents continue to choose suburban communities. A few respondents suggested that they would like to live closer to downtown, but cannot afford it, or cannot afford to buy a new home of the same standard and quality as their new home in the suburbs. Often, residents decided to live in familiar locations, sometimes downsizing to smaller homes or upsizing to larger homes within the same area of HRM. Residents adjusted to car-oriented lifestyles by working from home, changing their schedules to avoid travelling in commuter traffic, and choosing public transit for some trips. While most respondents were satisfied with their neighbourhoods, some recognized that suburban communities will face challenges as they grow. Residents suggested that traffic congestion will likely increase, expressing concern that the city has an insufficient road network and aging infrastructure. Some suggested that local governments need to invest in efficient mass transportation systems to make the city more sustainable.

Several respondents who owned their homes viewed them as investments which are appreciating in value. Although some talked about staying for the long term others expected to move up or to downsize when the opportunity or need developed. Some would like to live more centrally, but indicated that homes would be too expensive closer to the city centre. Several expected that suburban living will continue to be popular as housing costs escalate. A few respondents, however, wondered whether residents' changing priorities would alter the form and function of the suburbs in the future.

Conclusion

The next step of this analysis will explore the extent to which mixing housing types encourages diversity and interaction among diverse groups of people within the same neighbourhoods. While planning theory suggests that providing a mix of housing types will provide opportunities for people to live in diverse neighbourhoods, and foster community through their relationships, interviews with suburban HRM residents indicate that many residents interact only casually with their immediate neighbours. Planning theory often assumes that residents want to develop strong relationships and a sense of community in their neighbourhoods. Preliminary findings from this research indicate that most residents describe themselves as satisfied with friendly but relatively impersonal relationships with their immediate neighbours.

Although respondents spoke of their communities as diverse, income levels found in suburban neighbourhoods continue to be relatively high, with little housing provided for those of low socioeconomic status. Further research is needed to examine the extent to which residents are open to incorporating affordable housing into new and existing suburban developments, and what steps could be taken to facilitate construction of housing for a broader mix of incomes.

As they work to achieve sustainable suburban communities, those involved in planning and developing the suburbs can benefit from understanding the reasons residents choose to live in these areas. The resident's perspective can help to contextualize planning practice and will provide useful empirical evidence for evaluating planning theory. Interviews with suburban HRM residents have indicated that residents continue to choose suburban living primarily due to attractive pricing, retail and recreational amenities, and the type of housing available. While residents expressed concern with the form and function of suburban communities, especially with the car-oriented nature of their neighbourhoods, few respondents spoke of a desire to move to denser, more urbanized areas. Most led automobile-adapted lives by choice. Since the suburbs continue to attract new residents despite planning policies that promote re-urbanization, municipal authorities face considerable challenges in trying to promote regional planning objectives to seek greater sustainability and urban efficiencies.

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