



May 30, 2011

Clerk of the Board
Nova Scotia Utility and Review Board
PO Box 1692, Unit M, Suite 300
1601 Lower Water Street
Halifax, NS B3J 3S3

RE: HRM's Application to Confirm the Number of Councilors and Boundaries of Polling Districts

The Halifax Chamber of Commerce would like to notify the Nova Scotia Utility and Review Board (NSUARB) of our intention to speak at the public hearing on June 20th, 2011. The Halifax Chamber would also like to provide the following official written submission of our opinion and commentary on the subject.

The Chamber's involvement in the boundary review debate has been extensive. Since 2002, we've been recommending that a smaller city council would lead to more efficient and effective governance for the municipality. This sentiment has been expressed repeatedly to us by our 1500 local business members who, collectively, employ about 80,000 citizens of our city. In our 2010 Spring Issues Survey, 81% of our members agreed that council was too large. This is also the general sentiment of the overall population of Halifax, as recent citizen polls demonstrate. A CityThink survey conducted in April 2011 found that 64% of residents would like to see a smaller number of councilors.

There are many important elements that create a strong municipal governance system. The Chamber recognizes that the number of councilors is not the only factor, nor is it the magic solution to inefficiencies in governance or delays in decision-making. However, we submit to you that reducing the size of Council by a significant margin – such as down to 15, as we suggest – is one vehicle to achieve positive change.

We firmly believe a council size of 15 would ensure more focused and efficient meetings, and lead to quicker and better decision-making. This is significant for our local businesses because they rely and depend on City Council to make the right choices for them in a timely manner. Local entrepreneurs require stability and efficient decision-making for their own business planning purposes. This includes the many tax and development-related decisions Council faces on a regular basis, which often have enormous implications for local businesses.

The present governance structure of Council often leads to convoluted and lengthy debates among the 23 Councilors, making it difficult to effectively manage. Furthermore, benchmark research reveals that Canadian municipalities serving cities with similar population densities typically do so with fewer councilors than Halifax. For example, Victoria BC – a city of 352,421 people – is governed by 8 councilors. London, Ontario has a population of 489,274 and is governed by 14 councilors. St John’s, NFLD has 187,596 residents and 10 councilors, and Regina, Saskatchewan has a population of 210,000 people with 10 councilors.

Based on our benchmark research of other Canadian municipalities, we conclude that a 15-member council is sufficient in size to provide effective representation to our municipality of just over 400,000 people without significantly increasing the workload for each councilor or negatively impacting municipal democracy.

A total of 15 voices around the council table will ensure that a good range of political perspectives are represented. At the same time, it will allow for greater functionality by operating with a more manageable number of participants, thereby making it much easier for the mayor to guide council meetings along to more efficient outcomes.

Robert Williams, Public Affairs Consultant, noted in his December 2010 report to the NSUARB that HRM’s boundary review application “presumes that a 23-member council is optimal, but does not substantiate that belief with evidence”. Our due diligence in researching other comparable jurisdictions has not produced a “silver bullet” for municipal governance. It depends on a variety of factors. But why should we presume that our “status quo” approach is the best one? Why can’t Halifax lead the way? Be bold. Be courageous. And let us be the ones that other cities in Canada seek to emulate.

The Halifax Chamber of Commerce urges the Utility and Review Board to reflect upon the positive repercussions a reduction in the size of our city council could bring to our municipality.

I look forward to appearing before the Board on June 20th, and to contributing towards a more positive outcome for our community and for our local businesses.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Valerie Payn". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being more prominent than the last.

Valerie Payn
President
Halifax Chamber of Commerce

