

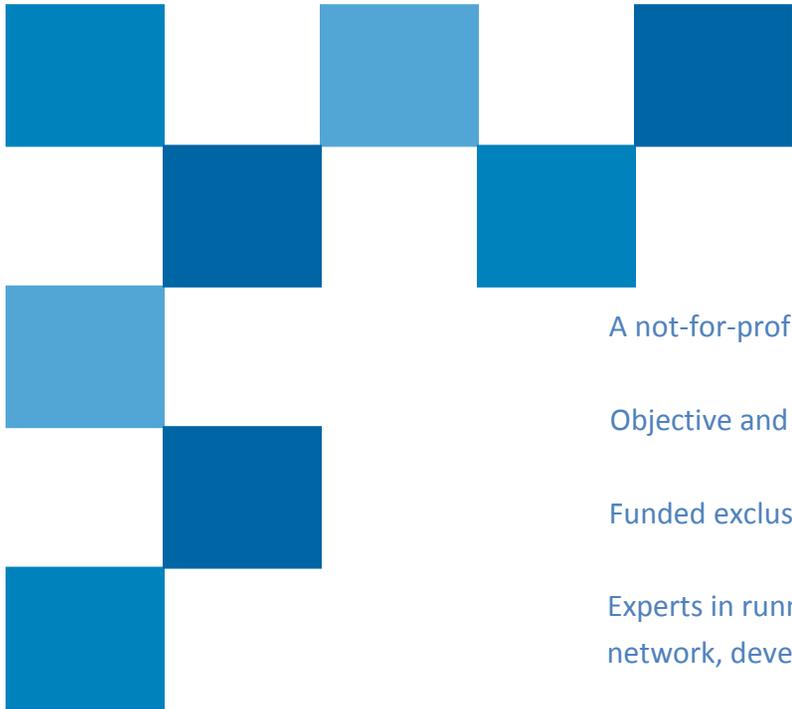
Annual Municipal Issue Note

September 2011



HALIFAX CHAMBER
OF COMMERCE
stronger together





WE ARE

A not-for-profit business organization that takes a business - like approach to its operations.

Objective and non-partisan; we do not lobby for specific interests.

Funded exclusively through membership fees and fees for services we provide.

Experts in running conferences, publishing and disseminating information, helping people network, developing leadership skills, and building community capacity.

Specialists in the development and advocacy of public policy.

Not a government department or agency.

Independent from, but affiliated with the Nova Scotia, Atlantic Provinces and Canadian Chamber of Commerce.

A diverse organization made up of businesses that mirror the Halifax, Nova Scotia and Canadian economies.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Halifax Chamber of Commerce is a best practice business advocacy organization that strives to make Halifax an even better place to live, work and play. It is the oldest Chamber in North America with roots dating to 1750 and was the first Chamber in North America to become ISO certified. The Chamber is an active voice for business at the federal, provincial and municipal level.

The Chamber has set out the following priorities for 2011-13 to better represent the needs and interests of our membership. These new strategic priorities are based on member feedback and include:

- 1) Helping small business take advantage of our provincial and city economic strategies, and
- 2) Making Halifax more competitive

In light of this realignment to our strategic focus, this note outlines the Chamber’s advocacy work on the many issues facing member businesses in the City.

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ECONOMIC COMPETITIVENESS

One of the focus areas of the Chamber is to advocate for a more competitive Halifax, making it easier and more attractive to do business here in Halifax.

Despite our ongoing advocacy efforts, the topic of commercial tax reform has stalled. As explained in previous Chamber communications, commercial tax reform is not necessarily about paying less tax – although that would surely be welcomed. Rather, we see commercial tax reform as a method of strengthening the competitiveness of our commercial sector through adopting a more equitable and more transparent tax structure.

Due to the nature of our work and the private sector organizations we represent, we will continue to advocate for tax reform. Although the issue seems to have been dropped from the municipal agenda, we will continue to communicate our concerns to Council and the municipality until it is revisited.

THE CHAMBER WILL BE LOOKING FOR:

- The City to revisit Commercial Tax Reform.
- Enhanced transparency by ensuring that fees paid to the City by commercial taxpayers are reasonable, and clearly linked to services received.
- The City to specify revenue for urban development, specifically for the downtown core.
- The development of a clear, equitable commercial tax rate benchmark as well as a concise communication strategy for it.
- New and innovative ways to access input from the commercial sector concerning tax reform, and other competitive issues such as regulation and an ‘open for business’ attitude.

SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORTATION

Another area the Chamber will continue to focus on is sustainable transportation investment. The development of a more effective and efficient transportation system has the potential to improve the attractiveness of our city and thus our competitive positioning.

Furthermore, after having held numerous City Economic Strategy 2011-2016 consultation meetings and discussions, it has become clear to us that transportation is still a hot topic that our members have a vested interest in pursuing.

The Chamber's Transportation Committee was pleased to hear the City and Halifax Stanfield International Airport have reached an agreement on establishing Transit service to and from the Airport. This is something we have advocated for in past years.

The Chamber Committee has also taken a keen focus on sustainable transportation methods such as Active Transportation, car pooling programs, and CarShare commuting options. Along these lines, the Committee is supportive of a new program being developed by the city which offers alternative transportation options to employees in downtown Halifax in an attempt to ease congestion in the downtown core, reduce parking spaces, and enhance the bottom line of employers. The program is called SmartTrip, and the Chamber will be playing an active role in consulting the business community to help shape this program and make it a beneficial and powerful tool for local businesses.

THE CHAMBER WILL BE LOOKING FOR:

- A Master Transportation Plan for the city. Transportation plans should be integrated, into one, coordinated, overall plan as part of the upcoming Regional Plan which is to be reviewed in 2011.
- A review of the concept of an amalgamated transit authority for the city. The Mayor supports this and stated so during his 2008 campaign.
- The City to continue to work with the business community to create a SmartTrip program that will enhance sustainable transportation, employee wellness and productivity, and the bottom lines of local businesses.

- The City to engage the business community earlier on in the transportation policy and planning process.

EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE

The Chamber was pleased with the Utility and Review Board's decision on July 27th, 2011, to reduce the number of councilors from 23 down to 16. This represents a significant win for the Chamber and our members, as it is our belief that a smaller council should foster more focused, efficient meetings which will ultimately have a positive impact on our citizens and businesses and the way in which they are governed.

A majority of Chamber members have indicated that they support a smaller council and streamlined decision-making as opposed to delayed decisions that can have a significant impact on their businesses. As always, the Chamber listened to the concerns of the many business organizations we represent, and attempted to make our collective voice heard via press releases, e-mails, and a formal letter addressed to the Mayor and councilors themselves. Valerie Payn appeared before the Utility and Review Board during the public hearing process, and presented our case for a smaller council.

We do not expect that reducing the size of council alone will create the growing, prosperous, vibrant city that people tell us they want - but a smaller group always makes decision-making easier. The onus will fall to Council to be leaders and ensure we have an effective Council devoted to making Halifax better.

THE CHAMBER WILL BE LOOKING FOR:

- Council to accept and embrace this opportunity to better represent the citizens of Halifax and work together to make efficient, effective decisions that will put our city on a real path of growth and success.

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

Another area the Chamber will continue to support is the sound financial management of our municipality, as a well-managed city should result in a more competitive one. Simply put, we must live within our means.

Additional revenue received from higher assessments should be used to keep the commercial tax burden lower. The commercial sector in Halifax pays almost four times the tax rate as the residential sector and receives minimal services in return.

The City continues to make progress towards reducing their debt; this year, the budget forecasts an additional \$5 million to be reduced from the city's debt through the Multi-Year Financial Strategy, bringing our debt down to \$275.3 million.

THE CHAMBER WILL BE LOOKING FOR:

- The municipality to continue to ensure that debt repayment targets are met.
- The city to ensure there is a long term financing plan in place to replace and renew infrastructure.
- Net debt to reach the point where the city can achieve the Multi-Year Financial Strategy objective of financial flexibility.

THE ECONOMIC STRATEGY

The Chamber has been extremely active in providing input and feedback on the new City Economic Strategy to guide us through the next five years towards an even more successful model of economic growth. In June 2010, the Chamber held sessions with different stakeholder groups – a random sampling of Chamber members, the Chamber's Board of Directors and Committee Chairs, and Chamber members who were involved in the development process of the last Economic Strategy.

Stakeholders expressed their views on the newly proposed economic strategy for the city. The vision, we were told, should showcase Halifax as a world class small city, and a hub of economic and social prosperity that embraces growth, innovation, and expertise, as well as a business-friendly attitude.

Andrew Boswell (President of Nova Communications and Chamber Board member) and Valerie Payn (President and CEO, Halifax Chamber of Commerce) played an integral role on the Steering Committee for the development of the 2011-2016 Strategy entitled *A GREATER Halifax*.

The Chamber will continue to monitor the implementation of the new Economic Strategy for our city, and will seek any and all opportunities to aid small businesses reap all of the benefits this Strategy has to offer.

CHAMBER ADVOCACY WORK

This note describes some of the key areas the Chamber will be focusing on over the next year. We look forward to working with you to achieve any and all of these objectives in the near future.

More information about the Chamber and its advocacy work can be accessed by contacting the office or visiting the Chamber web site at www.halifaxchamber.com.

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