

Annual Municipal Issue Note

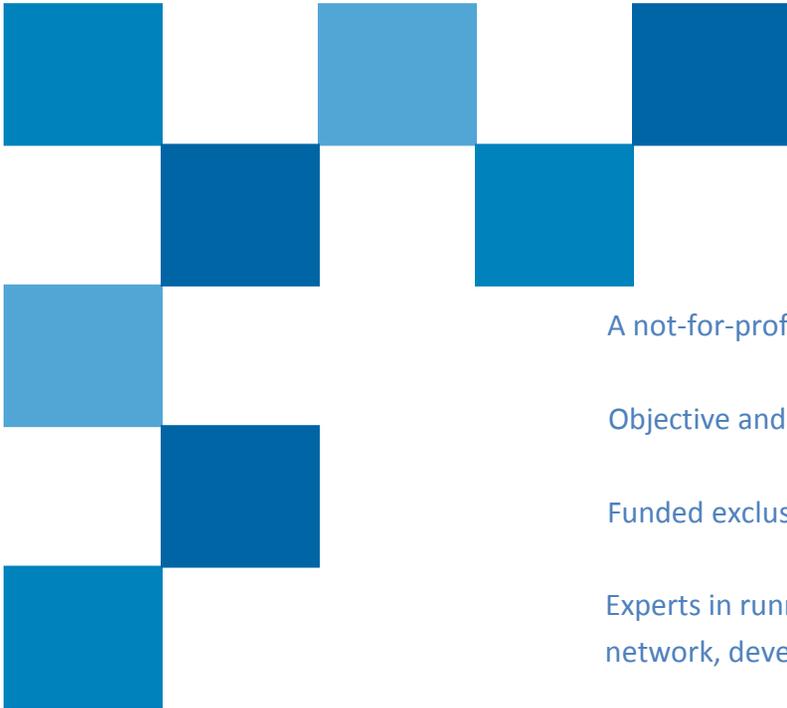
September 2010



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.

This note outlines key Chamber advocacy areas that are municipal in scope, and in line with one or more of our key strategic priorities. These priorities include: people, health care, sustainability, competitive positioning, and economic growth. The specific topics stated in this note are issues upon which we will be focusing our advocacy efforts over the next 12 months. All of the issues in this report relate back to the Chamber’s current number one priority – sustainable competitiveness.

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IMPROVE OUR BUSINESS CLIMATE

One of the more important objectives of the Chamber is to advocate for a stronger and more competitive business climate, making it easier and more attractive to do business here in Halifax. This is a strong focal area as it pertains directly to our strategic priorities of economic growth and competitive positioning, two critical aspects of any modern municipality.

Despite our recent advocacy efforts, the topic of commercial tax reform has not yet progressed. As explained in previous press releases and other statements, commercial tax reform is not necessarily about paying less tax – although that would surely be welcomed. Rather, the Chamber (and the general business community) sees commercial tax reform as a method of strengthening the competitiveness of our commercial sector through adopting a more equitable and more transparent tax structure.

It should be noted that, due to the nature of our work and the private sector organizations we represent, we will not abandon commercial tax reform. Although the issue seems to have been dropped from the municipal agenda, we will continue to communicate our concerns to the municipality.

THE CHAMBER WILL BE LOOKING FOR:

- Commercial tax reform.
- Enhanced transparency by ensuring that fees paid to the city by commercial taxpayers are reasonable (i.e. investigate why businesses are paying twice for waste collection services.)
- Some of this revenue to be used as an urban development tool, specifically for the downtown core.
- Development of a clear and concise commercial tax rate benchmark as well as a communication strategy for it.
- New and innovative ways to access input from the commercial sector concerning tax reform.

SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORTATION

Another area the Chamber will continue to focus on is sustainable transportation investment. The Chamber was pleased to see that a substantial amount of investment will be made in Metro Transit; however we will continue to support other policy options that will result in further improvements to our transportation sector. Transportation remains an ongoing concern here at the Chamber because it relates to our strategic priorities of economic growth, people, competitive positioning, and sustainability.

For local businesses, sufficient access to public transit plays a significant role in the ability to attract and retain employees, as well as the decision of where to locate one's business. A continuously improved and expanded public transit system can thus have an indirect impact on one's bottom line and act as a powerful tool for achieving economic growth. In the Chamber's Spring Issues Survey of 2008, 34% of respondents chose transportation as the number one issue that the Chamber should be involved in over the next few years. 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 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. Transportation should shape our city planning more than it has in the past.
- 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 work with the Airport Authority to establish Transit service to and from Halifax Stanfield International Airport.
- More transportation funding from the Province that would at least bring us to a level that is comparable to other provinces and territories. (We have written to the province to this effect.)

EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE

The Chamber was disappointed that Council failed to reduce their size as a means to achieve a more efficient and effective governing structure for our municipality. 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.

The Chamber has not advocated for a reduction in council size simply because we think it should be smaller. Rather, throughout this entire process we have recognized that the ultimate goal is a new governing structure for Council that better serves the residents and businesses of our municipality. While the number of councilors remains the same for now, the Chamber will continue to look for a better and more efficient municipal governance structure.

THE CHAMBER WILL BE LOOKING FOR:

- Real changes that will ensure our City is governed as effectively and efficiently as possible.
- Establishment of a third party to investigate Council size in future years; councilors should not be expected to determine their own job security.

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

Another area the Chamber will continue to support is the sound financial management of our municipality, as this issue falls under our strategic priorities of economic growth and competitive positioning. With a deficit of approximately \$7 million dollars, the city should be taking clear and measurable steps towards reforming or restructuring their current pension plan to protect the financial security of future retirees and mitigate the fiscal risk to the city.

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 municipality to monitor the city's pension plan; currently has a deficit of \$7.1 million.

THE ECONOMIC STRATEGY

With the current economic plan for the City set to expire this fall, the Chamber has been active in providing input and feedback on the new proposed 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 opinions to us 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.

The Chamber remains dedicated to the successful development of the new Economic Strategy for our city, and will stand by ready to assist in any way we possibly can.

THE CHAMBER WILL BE LOOKING FOR:

- Council to adopt the newly revised Economic Strategy and meet its targets and measures of success.
- The Chamber will continue in its role as the independent observer for the municipality's Economic Strategy and will evaluate and report upon its performance and achievements in the coming years.

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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