

2023 - 2024 Municipal Pre-Budget Submission

Presented to:
Mayor Mike Savage and HRM Councillors

March 31, 2023



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2023 - 2024 RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation: The Budget Committee should take a closer look internally at potential cost saving options like pension reform, and/or deferring the recommended capital spending projects to achieve their goal of a maximum 4% increase to the average property tax bill for the 2023/24 budget.

Recommendation: In 2022, Halifax increased the tax rate for commercial property by 4.01% (the biggest increase in 8 years) while residential rates dropped 3% (greatest decrease in 8 years). As a result, Halifax's commercial-to-residential tax ratio has climbed to 3.06. Halifax needs to reduce the amount of commercial property taxes it imposes on our business community, currently the highest commercial tax rates for the twelfth consecutive year out of all major Canadian CMAs.

Recommendation: Ensure the business community is aware and accepting of the proposed Averaging Program as is before it is applied within HRM.

Recommendation: Ensure municipal workers adopt a hybrid remote work model requiring a minimum in-person office attendance of 3-4 days a week to help stimulate the downtown area.

Recommendation: Investigate the most efficient and cost-effective implementation of a smart parking system for the downtown areas of Halifax and Dartmouth.

Recommendation: Investigate the opportunities for developing an Infrastructure Trust Program for HRM. This could not only incentivize additional investments into more sustainable infrastructure projects, but also help the Municipality to achieve its climate goals from its Strategic Priorities Plan.

Recommendation: Provide an updated and a clear plan for distribution of funds collected from the HalifACT program, including how these funds will help support Halifax businesses transition to more sustainable practices. The Chamber can work as a partner to help with the delivery, promotion, and communication of a new sustainable business transition program.

Recommendation: HRM needs to complete an accelerated, wide-ranging study on forecasting transit needs for not only the downtown, but also the overall municipality, including industrial parks, and other adjoining municipalities and towns.

Recommendation: Greater identification and consideration for international students within HRM's Co-operative Education Opportunities and Internship Program.

Recommendation: Adoption and promotion of the 50-30 Challenge throughout municipal Task Forces, Boards, and Commissions, with a goal to achieve this mandate by 2030.

Recommendation: Implement all the recommendations from the Deloitte Report on HRM's Housing Development Barriers, specifically the recommendations around bylaws and zoning, and provide public updates on the progress towards the removal of the barriers laid out within the report.

2023 - 2024 RECOMMENDATIONS CON'T

Recommendation: Establish a Trusted Developer Program for enhanced and faster approvals of permits and other development/planning requirements.

Recommendation: Assign senior staff members with overriding authority to be a single point of contact for project timeline accountability.

Recommendation: Develop metrics for accountability for building permits by housing type across all relevant departments including Parks, Recreation, & Communities, Public Works, and Planning & Development departments within HRM. Ensure that council agrees to these metrics and are followed by the single contact person assigned to files.

Recommendation: The Municipality should forgo collection of municipal fees for approved affordable housing units as an incentive for developers to build more affordable housing to address this shortfall in Halifax.

Recommendation: HRM create a similar program to Amherst's developer incentive program where the municipality covers the initial infrastructure costs like sewer and water connections, which are later paid back by the developers after the units sell. This can be on a case-by-case basis to allow HRM better control over which types of units are approved for the incentive.

Recommendation: Investigate the opportunities between the HRM and the Province to create a transitional housing unit in the central area to house the influx of foreign construction and trades workers. This could later be converted into a public housing unit after the supply of housing has improved and the skilled newcomers no longer require temporary worker housing. The Municipality could provide the land and the Province could provide the units.

THE HALIFAX CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

The overall goal of the Halifax Chamber of Commerce is to create value and prosperity for our 1,900 members and their over 94,000 employees. Through our 2019-2023 Strategic Plan, we are providing the services businesses need, hosting events that will help them learn, and advocating for the conditions in the economy that enhance their prosperity. Our task forces — Fostering Private Sector Growth and Accessing a Skilled Workforce — are currently working towards goals that aid in our members' prosperity and the economic growth of the Municipality. Our signature and annual events feature local entrepreneurs, immigrants, post-secondary institutions, and prestigious business organizations. Each year we provide our members the opportunity to hear the state of the Municipality and Province during luncheons and celebrate their successes at our Business Awards.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Halifax is growing at record rates, having added over 20,000 new residents over the last year. This influx of population has accentuated the need for increased municipal services and infrastructures like transportation and housing to accommodate and retain the record number of newcomers. Sound fiscal planning is essential to be able to deliver the required municipal services while also creating an environment that fosters private sector growth with a long-term view. Due to the scarcity of resources, deciding which areas to invest in requires careful deliberations on behalf of our elected officials and an ability to prioritize and make tough decisions.

In order to provide the municipal services required, the Municipality is planning to raise property taxes, parking fees, permitting fees, and reducing other municipal services. And while population growth is essential to economic growth, we also need to create an environment that incentivizes entrepreneurship, innovation, and private sector growth to attract new businesses, employ more residents and grow our existing commercial sector. Many businesses have been forced to change their spending habits and find innovative solutions in the face of inflation, rising interest rates, labour shortages, carbon taxes, and supply chain issues. Coupled with the increasing municipal fees, many businesses are stretched thin, or simply forced to close.

The Municipal Pre-Budget Submission this year is broader than just a submission on the budget and also submits ideas or recommendations to find innovative, relatively low-cost solutions that will help to support businesses and people through enhanced communication, new programs, lower taxes, and greater inclusivity. The recommendations are aimed at minimizing the impact to the Municipality's coffers while maximizing our regions potential for economic growth. It is not our expectation that all of these ideas will be implemented immediately but will be thoughtfully examined with a view to the future.

The Chamber has provided a list of recommendations focused on commercial taxation, housing, people and supports for business. We hope you will consider our asks as each has been obtained through Chamber task force meetings, discussions with our attendees and members at round tables and events, and through the countless hours of calls each month where we connect with our membership.

TAXATION

Reduce Spending

Following a 4.6% increase to the average tax bill last year, this year the Budget Committee attempted to set the average residential and commercial tax bill to 4% for the upcoming 2023/24 budget, with proposals for reductions from the original recommended 8% increase. According to the January 25th, 2023 Budget Committee Report, changing the revenue increase from an 8% average tax bill increase to 4% creates a gap of \$25.1 million between revenues and expenditures in 2023/24.¹ In the Committee's attempt to achieve a 4% increase, they have looked at mostly external ways they can increase municipal revenues, like increasing parking fees, building permitting fees, and terminating agreements. Despite these additional fees, which will be borne by residents and businesses, the Committee is still forecasting a 6% increase in the average tax bill. Although Council may believe they have exhausted all other options, there are ways they can look internally at additional cost saving measures. HRM's largest category of expenditures is compensation which comprised over 41% (\$458 million) of their total expenditures (\$926 million) in 2022/23, and is expected to increase by \$20 million this year, impacting the tax bill by 3.3%.² Associated with those compensation costs is the cost to fund the Municipal pension plan, which by comparison, is one of the most expensive municipal plans in the entire country. Additionally, there are a number of capital spending projects that could be deferred for a year. Below are a few capital spending projects that could be deferred this year that would drastically increase the likelihood of achieving the 4% target and should be explored.³

Halifax Forum Redevelopment: \$2,500,000

Mill Cove Ferry Service: \$5,000,000

Corporate Accommodations: \$2,000,000

IMP Land Acquisitions: \$16,400,000

Total Cost Savings for 2023/24 Budget: \$25,900,000*

* These savings only reflect the cost for the work to be completed in 2023/24, not the cost of the entire project.

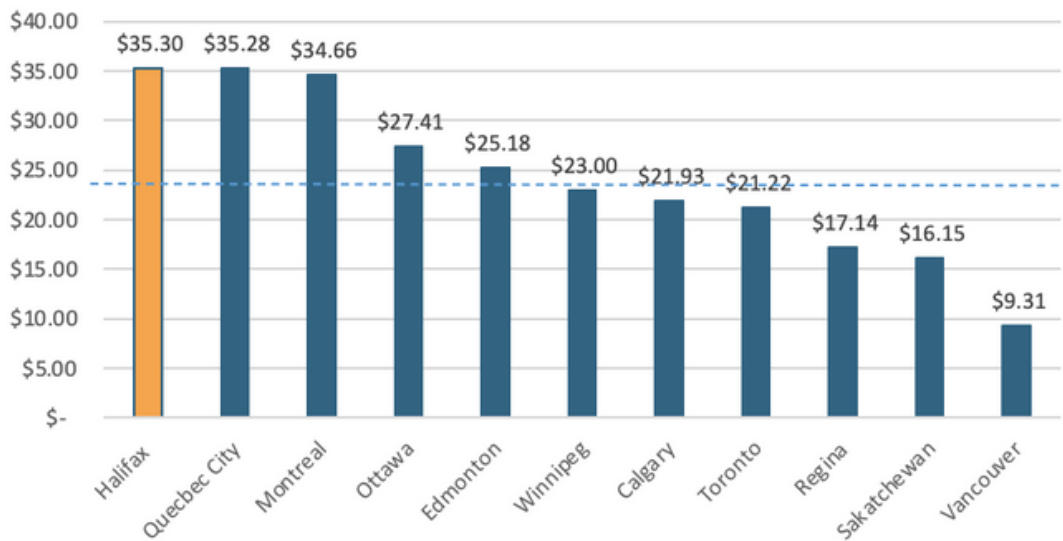
Recommendation: The Budget Committee should take a closer look internally at potential cost saving options like pension reform, and/or deferring the recommended capital spending projects to achieve their goal of a maximum 4% increase to the average property tax bill for the 2023/24 budget.

COMMERCIAL TAXATION

Commercial Property Taxes

Property tax is the primary source of revenue for Canadian municipalities and is used to fund services such as police, fire, and municipal services, including public transit, road repair, education, and recreational programs. All owners of property pay tax based on the assessed value of their property, but the tax rate per dollar of value varies depending on whether the property is used for residential or commercial purposes. Business properties generally use less of the services paid for by the property tax. While raising the rate of taxation for residential properties is unpopular, balancing the burden between business and residential properties is not only equitable, but it can also attract commercial investment, promote job growth, and increase government revenues.⁴

Estimated Commercial Property Taxes - per \$1,000 of Assessment, 2022



Source: Atlas Group Property Tax Benchmark Report 2022

Recommendation: In 2022, Halifax increased the tax rate for commercial property by 4.01% (the biggest increase in 8 years) while residential rates dropped 3% (greatest decrease in 8 years). As a result, Halifax's commercial-to-residential tax ratio has climbed to 3.06. Halifax needs to reduce the amount of commercial property taxes it imposes on our business community, currently the highest commercial tax rates for the twelfth consecutive year out of all major Canadian CMAs.

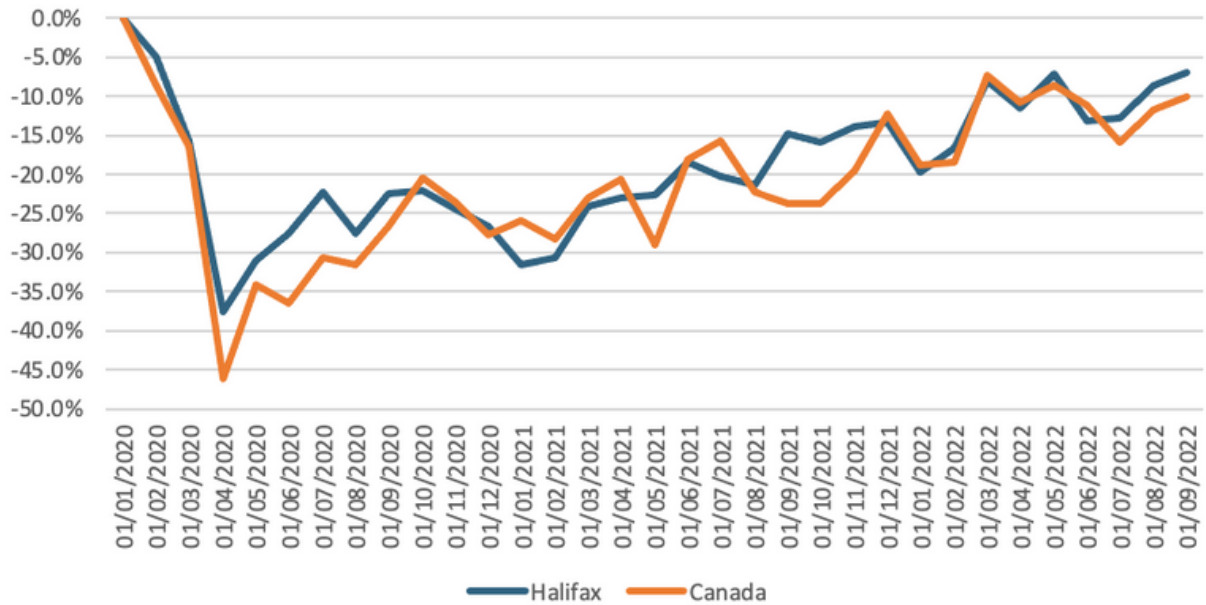
Commercial Assessment Averaging Program

The three-year Assessment Averaging Program will increase predictability in property taxes for commercial property owners and businesses and add certainty to future operating costs (related to taxation) for business owners with properties experiencing sudden spikes in assessed values. However, through discussions with municipal staff, we are concerned that the program will need to reach a net-zero loss of taxes; thus, some businesses may see an increase in their taxes. This is concerning, and we would like to ensure that the business community is aware of this necessity before the program is accepted into the rule.

Recommendation: Ensure the business community is consulted and accepts the proposed Averaging Program as is before it is applied within HRM.

BUSINESS SUPPORT

Mobility to Workplaces - Downtown Recovery Metric



Source: Canadian Chamber of Commerce Data Lab, Data Dashboard, Mobility to Workplace

Municipal Hybrid Work Model

Metro city's downtowns should be recognized as clusters because they are areas of high business density, with a critical mass of large and small businesses, post-secondary institutions, and other research facilities. They energize the economy and serve as an engine of growth. Despite some of the municipality's efforts to support the downtown recovery through the elimination of parking fees, removal of patio fees, and the implementation of light shows, Halifax's mobility to the workplace (a metric used to measure downtown recovery) is still 7% below the pre-pandemic levels. Halifax Regional Municipality is one of the biggest employers in the city with roughly 3,600-5,000 employees, and their current flexible work guidelines require staff to be in the office a minimum of 2 days a week. A 2007 study estimated that 50% of downtown office workers eat out roughly 4 out of every 5 days, versus 38% of suburban office workers. Having HRM office staff increase to a 3-4-day flexible hybrid work policy would be an easy and affordable policy that could further help our downtown recovery.⁵

Recommendation: Ensure municipal workers adopt a hybrid remote work model requiring a minimum in-person office attendance of 3-4 days a week to help stimulate the downtown area.

Downtown Parking

While the goal is to have more and more people using Halifax's public transit system, the reality is that utilizing personal vehicles is still the established standard of transportation for many. Businesses want there to be more parking so they can service more customers, while government realizes that land is precious and would rather save it for better uses. Smart parking system solutions are a newer development that is yet to see widespread public application. The goal of smart parking systems is to monitor parking space availability in a facility and relay this information to people through easy-to-understand user interfaces in applications that are accessed through a smartphone or computer. This could be combined with the new smart meters that were recently installed throughout the entire downtown area. This could not only be an attractive tool for tourists, but smart parking systems have been shown to reduce emissions, manage retail or office parking, reduce traffic, and allow cities to become smart through real time traffic data.⁶

Recommendation: Investigate the most efficient and cost-effective implementation of a smart parking system for the downtown areas of Halifax and Dartmouth.

Infrastructure

Cities are struggling to pay for essential infrastructure like roads and bridges. Chicago has set up an Infrastructure Trust that raises capital from private sources, then shares the benefits with those private investors. The trust's purpose is to assist the people, the city government, and its sister agencies in providing alternative financing and project delivery options for transformative infrastructure projects.⁷ The infrastructure trust will provide distribution payments to the unitholders on a periodic basis. For example, a bank might put up money for efficiency improvements to old buildings, then take a percentage of the energy savings.

Recommendation: Investigate the opportunities for developing an Infrastructure Trust Program for HRM. This could not only incentivize additional investments into more sustainable infrastructure projects, but also help the Municipality to achieve its climate goals from its Strategic Priorities Plan.

Net Zero Sustainability

According to a recent KPMG in Canada survey, most Canadian businesses are committed to integrating environmental, social and governance (ESG) practices into their business strategies but say they need more help from government to transition to a greener economy. These results, collected from over 500 SMEs, show that most businesses believe governments need to do more with green tax legislation, with 80 per cent calling for additional tax incentives and investment tax credits to make it feasible for their company to adopt clean technologies and clean energy sources.⁸ In 2021, the regional council approved the establishment of a Climate Action Tax which directly supports the HalifACT plan, the municipality's long-term climate action plan. While the business community supports actions to improve HRM's resiliency against the impacts of climate change, transparency on the plan and its distribution of funds is necessary for the support of the businesses being taxed.

Recommendation: Provide an updated and a clear plan for distribution of funds collected from the HalifACT program, including how these funds will help support Halifax businesses transition to more sustainable practices. The Chamber can work as a partner to help with the delivery, promotion, and communication for any new sustainable business transition programs.

Transportation

The rapid population growth in HRM has accentuated our critical infrastructure needs, specifically transportation. While the Rapid Transit Strategy and Integrated Mobility Plan are useful, they are not addressing the full scope of Haligonians transit needs. As a record number of newcomers are arriving each year, they are increasingly forced to reside further and further away from the city's core. HRM needs to complete a wide-ranging study on forecasting the needs of the overall municipality, specifically the communities outside the Centre Plan such as the Airport Area, Eastern Shore, Peggy's Cove Coastal Region, and Bedford/Sackville areas.

Recommendation: HRM needs to complete an accelerated, wide-ranging study on forecasting transit needs for not only the downtown, but also the overall municipality, including industrial parks, and other adjoining municipalities and towns.

PEOPLE

Students & Skills

In 2022, it is estimated that there were over 31,000 international students across all Halifax Universities, including NSCC. Studying in Halifax offers newcomers a vast array of opportunities, not only from an academic perspective, but also to prepare them for future professional success. The more connections and networks that international students can connect with, the better their employment prospects will be and the higher the likelihood will be of retaining them in Halifax.⁹

Recommendation: Greater identification and consideration for international students within HRM's Co-operative Education Opportunities and Internship Program.

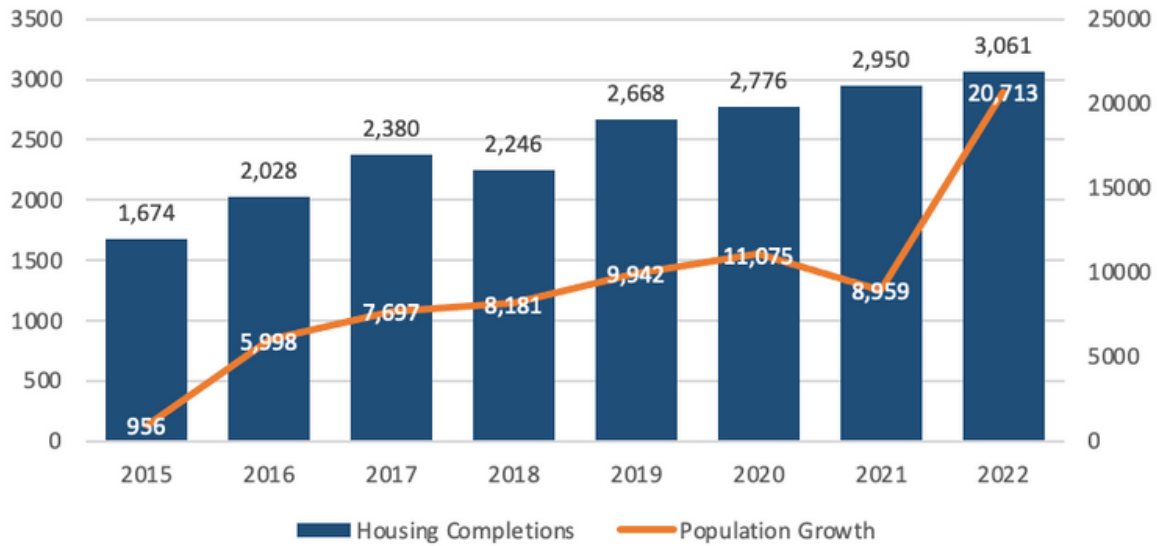
DEA&I

The 50-30 Challenge is an initiative between the Government of Canada, Canadian businesses, and diversity-focused organizations. The goal of the program is to challenge Canadian organizations to increase the representation and inclusion of diverse groups within their workplaces, while highlighting the benefits of giving all Canadians a seat at the table. The goal is to achieve a 50% gender parity on boards and within senior level management, as well as 30% representation of equity-deserving groups.

Recommendation: Adoption and promotion of the 50-30 Challenge throughout municipal Task Forces, Boards, and Commissions, with a goal to achieve this mandate by 2030.

HOUSING

Housing Completions vs. Population Growth - Halifax N.S.



Source: Table 34-10-0154-01 Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, housing starts, under construction and completions in selected census metropolitan areas, monthly & Statistics Canada. Table 17-10-0135-01 Population estimates, July 1, by census metropolitan area and census agglomeration, 2016 boundaries.

An insufficient volume of housing development in recent years, combined with current and anticipated population growth, has created a growing housing deficit across the province, most notably in Halifax. Halifax’s population grew by roughly 73,500 people since 2015.¹⁰ Over that same period, Halifax has completed roughly 20,000 new housing units. If these were all families of 4, that would be a commensurate amount of new housing to accommodate the population growth. The reality is that 32% of that growth is of younger adults aged 25-29 and 30-34.¹¹ HRM is a growing, prosperous municipality, but we have a severe housing shortage that will take years to correct. Continued action must be taken to address the situation if we are to maintain our reputation as a place people want to come to live, work, and raise their families. We also want businesses to move here secure in the knowledge that they can find the workforce they need, and that there will be a place for their existing staff to live.

Updating Bylaws & Zoning

Deloitte, who was retained by the Chair of the Executive Panel on Housing in HRM, published a report in October of 2022 which identified barriers to efficient and effective housing development in HRM and provided advice to address the key barriers through jurisdictional scans and best practices in other cities. For example, several jurisdictions such as Minneapolis, Vancouver, California, and Oregon up-zoned land previously reserved for single unit housing, allowing for multi-unit buildings. In Minneapolis, this was deemed as the single most important initiative the city had undertaken to increase housing supply. Similarly, Ontario and Minneapolis increased as-of-right density along corridors allowing for 6-20 storeys and reducing/removing previous discretionary rules. This immediately increased housing capacity and reduced the volume of complex development agreements.¹²

Recommendation: Implement all the recommendations from the Deloitte Report on HRM's Housing Development Barriers, specifically the recommendations around bylaws and zoning, and provide public updates on the progress towards the removal of the barriers laid out within the report.

Trusted Developer Program

In an effort to expediate the permitting process for residential construction units, the planning department could develop a Trusted Developer Program. This program would allow developers with a proven track record for submitting quality applications to be enrolled into this pilot project to expediate the number of approvals for new units while simultaneously reducing municipal staff's workloads.¹³

Recommendation: Establish a Trusted Developer Program for enhanced and faster approvals of permits and other development/planning requirements.

Single Point of Contact

For the applicants who are not Trusted Developers, a single point of contact should be in charge of the file and be held accountable for delivering set timelines and regular communications. This will increase accountability, file management, and customer service.¹⁴

Recommendation: Assign senior staff members with overriding authority to be a single point of contact for project timeline accountability.

Recommendation: Develop metrics for accountability for building permits by housing type across all relevant departments including Parks, Recreation, & Communities, Public Works, and Planning & Development departments within HRM. Ensure that council agrees to these metrics and are followed by the single contact person assigned to files.

AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Over the past several months, the Halifax Chamber has met with members from the development community, not-for-profits, city officials, provincial MLAs, and has hosted events dedicated to addressing the housing crisis in our region. One item that became clear from the engagement was the need to distinguish between two types of required housing: affordable housing (when 30% or less of a middle-income household's gross income goes towards paying for housing costs) and public housing (government sponsored economic assistance aimed towards alleviating housing costs and expenses for impoverished people and those with low to moderate incomes).¹⁵ Recent data suggests that nearly 700 Haligonians are experiencing homelessness. While a significant number of affordable housing units is urgently needed, research suggests that increasing the overall housing supply does not have the trickle-down effect to lower income individuals.¹⁶

Housing Development Fees

Through our discussions at industry roundtables with experts in construction, development, and public housing, it was estimated that roughly 25% of the cost of construction for housing units is related to government fees. In a new effort to incentivize developers to build various types of housing to address the shortage, and to better help people experiencing homelessness, the town of Amherst created a new developer incentive program where they will temporarily pay for new streets and underground infrastructure like sewer and water connections created through residential projects, on a case-by-case basis. The developer would then pay back the town's loan as the units sell.¹⁷

Recommendation: The Municipality should forgo collection of municipal fees for approved affordable housing units as an incentive for developers to build more affordable housing to address this shortfall in Halifax.

And/or

Recommendation: HRM create a similar program to Amherst's developer incentive program where the municipality covers the initial infrastructure costs like sewer and water connections, which are later paid back by the developers after the units sell. This can be on a case-by-case basis to allow HRM better control over which types of units are approved for the incentive.

Transitional Housing

The construction sector has estimated that they have roughly 3,000 job vacancies across the province. To address this issue our governments have been increasing the number of immigrants with skilled trades through targeted streams. An issue with this plan is securing housing for these foreign workers once they arrive. Construction stakeholders have suggested that the Municipality allow for a multi-unit affordable housing complex in the city centre that would offer newcomers in the construction sector to have temporary accommodations upon arrival. This would allow them to immediately begin working, have access to key transit routes, and be close to many job sites. Additionally, it will provide the newly arrived tradespeople with more time to find permanent accommodations. Once the housing supply sufficiently increases, the complex can be converted into a public housing unit for low-income individuals and families. Further, this would be in an ideal location to accommodate people experiencing chronic homelessness, offering better access to transit routes and employment opportunities.

Recommendation: Investigate the opportunities between the HRM and the Province to create a transitional housing unit in the central area to house the influx of foreign construction and trades workers. This could later be converted into a public housing unit after the supply of housing has improved and the skilled newcomers no longer require temporary worker housing. The Municipality could provide the land and the Province could provide the units.

CONCLUSION

The Halifax Chamber of Commerce is a business advocacy organization committed to creating value and prosperity for its members. The Chamber provides the services its members need while advocating for the conditions to enhance private sector growth. We are frequently in contact with our members through our Chamber Connects program and this submission highlights some of the most pressing issues we are hearing from the business community. This submission outlines a variety of ways the government can support Haligonians through fiscal sustainability, housing options, support for our most affected sectors, and ensuring all Nova Scotians are valued and heard. As our region continues to grow and officials aim to increase our population to 1 million by 2060, we need to create a vision for how we can achieve and accommodate this goal through collaboration and deliberation. We need to start by bringing all relevant stakeholders together like the Halifax Chamber, HRM, Halifax Partnership, Discover Halifax, and the BIDs to create a Vision 2060 initiative. The Chamber would be glad to meet with you to discuss our questions and recommendations and to share the concerns we hear from our business community.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'P. Sullivan', is positioned below the 'Sincerely,' text.

Patrick Sullivan
President & CEO,
Halifax Chamber of Commerce

CITATIONS

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