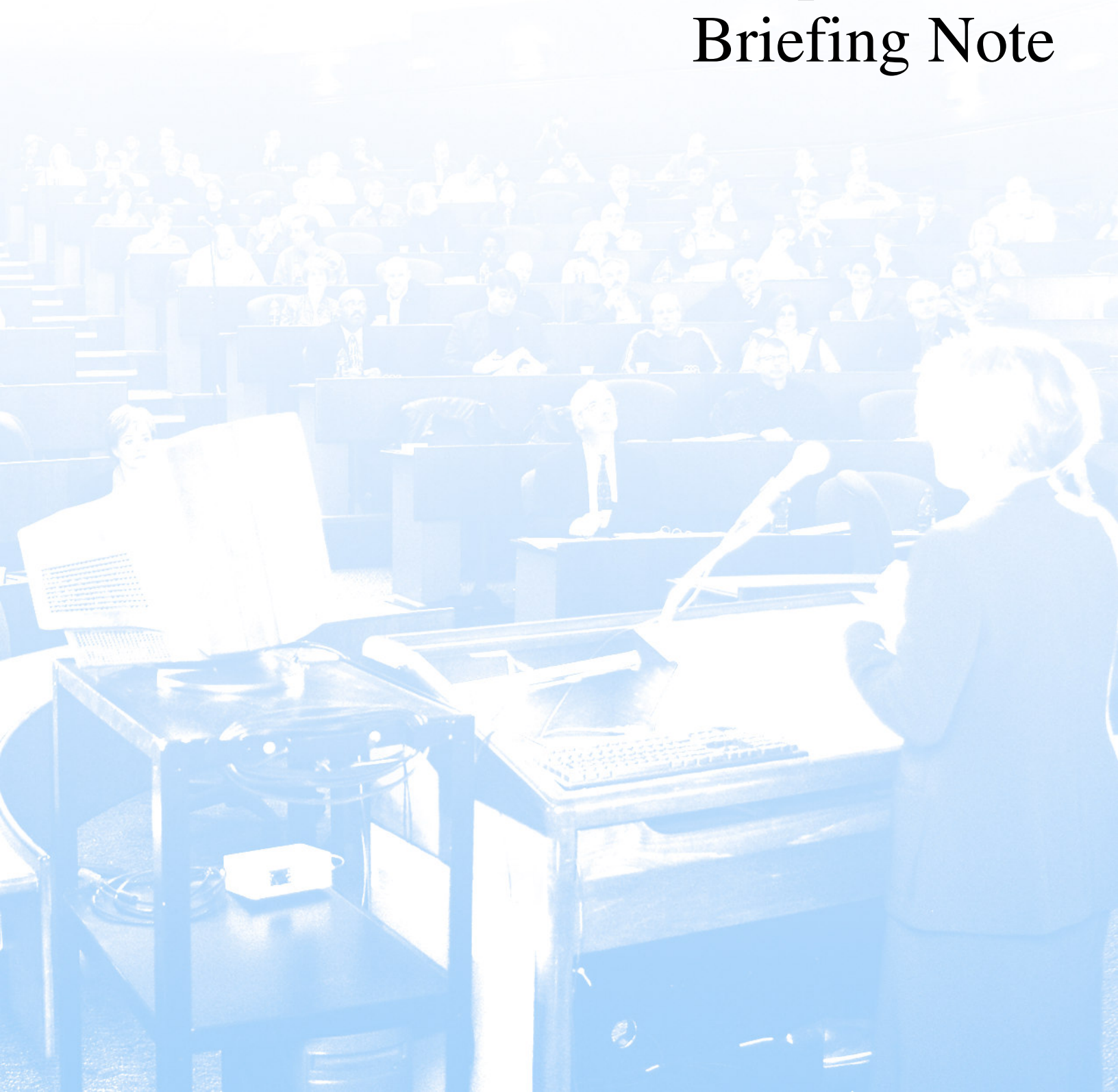




HALIFAX CHAMBER
OF COMMERCE

September 2006 Municipal Issues Briefing Note



INTRODUCTION

The Halifax Chamber of Commerce is a best-practice business advocacy organization representing the interests of its 1,700 members and approximately 75,000 employees across HRM. The Chamber continuously strives to make metro Halifax an even better place in which to live, work and play.

The Chamber's municipal affairs goals are to further develop policy and an approach on issues of importance to our members within the purview of the municipal government. We thank you for meeting with us and look forward to on-going dialogue and a continued working relationship on these and any areas of mutual concern.

We are fortunate to have many very good relationships among HRM staff, and Chamber staff and volunteers. We value the time and consideration that HRM staff and councilors give to the Chamber and its members. The communication of municipal initiatives to the Chamber membership through tools such as Business Voice magazine, Business Voice online and through committees of the Chamber is of real importance to our members. Also, by communicating our members' concerns with you we hope to contribute to building a better business climate in Halifax.

FISCAL ISSUES

The business performance of Chamber members is directly impacted by the current and future strength of our municipal government's budgetary decisions.

Overall, recent budgets show good balance among the competing priorities of operating and capital spending, taxes, and other ongoing costs such as debt servicing.

On the spending front, we recognize that the Municipality faces significant cost pressures, such as mandatory education costs and high inflation, due to a relatively large component of spending attributable to items like construction, fuel, and road repair. Even so, we are concerned about last year's overall 6.8% increase in spending. Spending restraint will be particularly important in this coming year, as assessments catch up to past market values and continue to rise at an increasing rate.

Adherence to HRM's Multi-Year Financial Strategy, and continued reduction in the Municipality's debt, is commendable. The on-going attention to long-term fiscal health is necessary for a sustainable future for our community.

With respect to taxes, we were pleased to see the details of the first steps of the Business Occupancy Tax (BOT) phase out, and are pleased to see the follow-through on the promise that benefits from the elimination of the BOT will be realized by the commercial sector.

As we have pointed out in the past, the commercial sector bears a heavy burden of taxes and, in order to improve our competitive position, we must make Halifax an attractive place to do business.

HRM/URBAN ISSUES

Halifax accounts for 46 per cent of Nova Scotia's GDP and one fifth of the economy of Atlantic Canada. As the economic hub of Atlantic Canada, Halifax's prosperity is closely linked to the prosperity of the province and the region.

Halifax has recently reached some major milestones with the completion and passing of the regional plan, a new economic strategy – our own immigration strategy, a

cultural plan and more. We will continue to promote Halifax's interests in provincial and federal arenas.

TRANSPORTATION

Transportation is fundamentally important to business. Whether a business's needs are primarily movement goods to customers or getting employees to work, they need excellent transportation links. The Chamber actively participates in the Gateway Council, a group that addresses issues of bring goods and people into Halifax. It is essential that the actions of all the players involved in the Gateway be well coordinated – by working together we can develop a Gateway on the Atlantic that will have a large and positive impact on international commerce for Canada.

We are also pleased to participate on the Strategic Joint Regional Transportation Planning Committee – a group that addresses the transportation challenges of moving goods and people around inside of Halifax.

WORKFORCE

Demographic trends are such that by 2031 Statistics Canada estimates that seniors will account for approximately one quarter of the country's population. This is double the current proportion of 13%. Businesses are beginning to see the effects of this shift and many are already finding it difficult to find needed labour.

Immigration

There has been good progress made on the immigration front in Nova Scotia recently. Including the development and first stages of implementation of the provincial immigration strategy, the Halifax Immigration Strategy, changes to rules relating to international students and significant changes to the Nominee program.

But increasing immigration is just one piece of the puzzle—we need to get better at keeping newcomers. The Chamber is committed to working with partners to make our community more welcoming to newcomers.

Health

Children today are the first generation in modern memory to be at risk of having a shorter life expectancy than their parents. With the intersection of demographic trends and health status, not only will finding efficiencies in the health care system be essential but improving the health of Canadians will be even more so. The costs of lower productivity and private health insurance are just two of the reasons it is important to businesses to have a healthier population. Furthermore as the population ages, a workforce that stays healthier longer can only be positive for a business community looking for skilled workers.

The Chamber has produced a report looking at how individuals, business and government can contribute to improved health and health care in Nova Scotia.

Skills & Education

We are fortunate in Halifax to have a highly educated workforce – we must build on this strength and ensure that our education system, including P-12, post-secondary institutions, and other training programs are meeting the needs of both students and industry by developing in them the skills required by today's employers.

We are putting together an education task force to see where the Chamber can make its best contribution to this important issue.

BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

The Chamber believes the government's greatest responsibility to business is to create the conditions for economic growth and activity with a competitive tax system and a well-defined and streamlined regulatory system. Concerns we hear from our members relate primarily to unpredictable or overly burdensome regulations. Frequently, from a municipal perspective these concerns relate to the planning and development process in Halifax. We hope the regional plan and its implementation will help alleviate some of these concerns. Stream-lined, consistent, well-communicated and well-implemented regulations and processes are in everyone's best interest, make the business environment more predictable and make Halifax a much more attractive place to do business.

COMMONWEALTH GAMES

The Chamber is very supportive of the commonwealth games and excited about not only the business opportunities they bring but also the impact such an event can have on raising the profile of sport in our community. Furthermore the benefits this kind of event can have on bringing the community together and building social capital are immeasurable. The Chamber has been communicating the value of the games to our members and to the media. We will look for more opportunities to do so in the future.

ECONOMIC STRATEGY

We are very pleased to have seen the launch of an economic strategy for Halifax and encouraged by some of the developments relating to the strategy. It is essential that, as a community, we do not lose sight of the importance of the strategy and of working together to implement it to best effect. To this end the Chamber is working with staff to design an event that will keep stakeholders abreast of progress and

encourage all those involved in strategy implementation to measure their success and share it with the community.

ENERGY

Chamber members and volunteers are increasingly recognizing the growing importance of renewable and sustainable energy sources. The Chamber sub-committee on renewable energy that last year focused on municipal actions to encourage reduced energy use and increased use of sustainable forms of energy, is broadening its focus and looking at the issue of sustainable energy and energy security – that is security of both supply and price.

DEFENCE

The Chamber recognizes the vital role the Armed Forces, in particular the Navy, play in our local business community. The Chamber is committed to working with the Forces to facilitate their needs and community integration.

CONSULTATION

The Chamber feels that consultation is an important part of any new or changed legislation, regulations or policies. We appreciate the care taken by a number of municipal units to consult with the public and the business community and wherever possible seek to communicate .

CHAMBER ADVOCACY WORK

More information about the Chamber and its advocacy work can be accessed by contacting the office or visiting the Chamber web site:

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