



**METROPOLITAN HALIFAX  
CHAMBER OF COMMERCE**

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*Strong Business. Strong Community.  
Since 1750.*

**2004 Key Issues  
Caucus Briefing Note**

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Key Issues Briefing Note

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The Chamber appreciates the opportunity to meet with caucus each year, to share the key advocacy issues that will be advanced throughout the year. The Metropolitan Halifax Chamber of Commerce is a best-practice business advocacy organization representing the interests of almost 2,000 members who combined represents over 90,000 employees across HRM. The Chamber continuously strives to make metro Halifax an even better place in which to live, work and play.

The policy and advocacy work of the Chamber is driven by the efforts of volunteers from committees and task forces consisting of more than 350 leaders from the business community. The Chamber has implemented a government relations plan that defines the public policy outcomes that are important to our organization and sets out key initiatives that will be undertaken by the Chamber to achieve those outcomes. The principles guiding our plan are:

- the Chamber is politically neutral
- the Chamber communicates its key priorities on a regular basis;
- there will be no surprises in any dealings with government;
- dialogue will be ongoing and meaningful; and
- Chamber advocacy will be consistent and regular.

The following document outlines key issues of concern to the Chamber. We look forward to on-going dialogue and continued working relationship on these and any other areas of mutual concern.

### **Provincial Finance**

#### Debtwatch

In the spring of 2003, Debtwatch was introduced – the Chamber’s provincial fiscal monitor. Through 5 indicators: tax competitiveness, sustainability, vulnerability, flexibility, and managing within budget; we have continued to monitor the fiscal health of the Province throughout the year.

Debt continues to be a priority for Chamber members. The Chamber will continue with Debtwatch and in the coming months we will again update members on progress that has been made at reducing Nova Scotia’s debt and increasing the overall financial well being.

#### Tax cuts

The Chamber was pleased to see the government introduce its Debt Management Plan in 2003, it is an important step in dealing with the high debt burden. We look forward to the implementation of the plan. However, the Chamber’s position on the tax cut remains the same. The provincial debt continues to grow. Until the debt is under control, the economy of Nova Scotia cannot sustain a tax cut.

## **Policy Coordination & Municipal Relations**

The Chamber believes there are many areas for an integration of shared priority areas, within and between levels of government and the community. We all share a significant role in creating our future community. Open lines of communication and strong relationships will enable the achievement of mutual goals.

The Chamber will be advocating on several policy areas of shared priority, and we look forward to and encourage participation by both the Province and Municipality on each.

### **Regional Planning**

HRM has undertaken a regional planning process. The Chamber has been highly involved with the process and encourages the participation of the Province as well, particularly with respect to areas of mutual jurisdiction. A strong capital region, with an aggressive plan for planned growth, will benefit the economy of the province.

The Chamber is committed to the development of a comprehensive regional plan to guide the future growth of Halifax. An aggressive, ambitious and challenging plan will paint a compelling view of what our community can be in the future. Together – community groups, government and business – can help to draw the road map that leads to the shared vision of our community.

### **Municipal Tax Reform**

It is important to ensure that the tax climate in HRM is attractive and competitive, on both the residential and commercial sides. It is the Chamber's view that municipal tax structure needs to be revised with a view towards developing a structure more appropriate for today's municipality. This must be done in conjunction with the Province. The Chamber would like to work with both HRM and the Province to explore options for improving the municipal tax structure.

### **Business Occupancy Tax**

Nova Scotia is the only province in Canada that has retained the business occupancy tax and it continues to have a negative impact on our business climate. The Chamber has supported efforts to pursue business tax reform particularly as it relates to the prompt elimination of the business occupancy tax. An elimination of the business occupancy tax would reduce administrative duplication and streamline the process by collecting the revenues through, for example, commercial property taxes. Maintaining a competitive and healthy business environment requires a tax structure that provides the business sector with fair and predictable levels of taxation.

### **Creative Funding Methods for HRM**

As the capital of Nova Scotia, we feel a strong Halifax is a benefit to the whole province. The Chamber has supported the efforts of HRM to find creative new funding methods. To do this, HRM must find new ways to fund infrastructure shortfalls by taking measures such as: finding new revenue streams, reducing costs and removing redundant assets.

### **Provincial Assessment Cap**

It is our understanding that the Province is currently considering an assessment cap on selected properties throughout Nova Scotia. The Chamber has significant concerns with this proposal and would be interested in working with HRM and the Province to examine the implications of this proposal prior to the initiative proceeding.

## **People Strategy**

Attracting and retaining skilled and qualified workers is a cornerstone to the success of our business community and our province. A new area of focus for the Chamber in 2004 is a “people strategy”. In the coming months we will endeavor to participate in the identification of the impacts of critical “people” issues on the business community and to identify what other organizations are doing and see how the Chamber can partner and leverage these other resources.

Immigration is a key component in the understanding of “people” issues impacting business. It is important to the economic and social prosperity of Nova Scotia. The Chamber continues to support the need for an effective immigration policy in our province that will maximize the benefits of immigration. We are pleased with the establishment of an Immigration Secretariat and the progress Nova Scotia has made in the past year. The Chamber will continue our work on immigration, and its importance to our province.

## **Oil and Gas**

In our 2002 caucus submission we noted that the regulatory burden had negative effects on the industry in our region and we encouraged government to move more quickly to establish firm and consistent frameworks and work towards simplifying the processes involved. We still believe this is a viable option. In our recent oil and gas policy statement, we have called for a single window (i.e. simplified and coordinated approach) into the regulatory process. We need to do what we can to create an environment to help the industry get off the ground.

The regulatory approval process in Nova Scotia takes a company almost 18 months, almost double the time required to receive similar approvals in the UK and Norway. The Chamber believes that the future of the oil and gas industry in Nova Scotia is severely compromised by the overly complex process. To help the industry grow to its potential, as a community we need to support initiatives to ensure a smoother, more efficient and more accessible process. We are pleased to have been advised that the Province is moving in this direction and we urge government to maintain the momentum toward making Nova Scotia a world class energy province.

## **US Customs Pre-Clearance**

Pre-clearance at Halifax International Airport continues to be a priority for the Chamber. Other airports in Canada of the approximate size of the Halifax International Airport presently offer this service. As the largest airport in Atlantic Canada, the Halifax International Airport is put at a significant competitive disadvantage in not being able to offer pre-clearance to business and leisure travelers coming to or through the Atlantic Region. This service allows greater speed and therefore greater travel flexibility for travelers en route from Halifax to the United States.

Atlantic Canada is the only region in Canada to not have a U.S. Customs pre-clearance airport. The Chamber urges continued provincial and federal government support and actions in achieving U.S. Customs pre-clearance in the Halifax International Airport.

## **Sunday Shopping**

Throughout 2004, we will continue our efforts on Sunday shopping. With the plebiscite on Sunday shopping scheduled for fall 2004, the Chamber will reinvigorate efforts to achieve the full de-regulation of retail hours in Nova Scotia. It remains our position that the provincial government should not be in the business of regulating store hours. We believe in a market driven approach to business. The Chamber stands firm in the conviction that our region must deregulate shopping hours if we are to be a truly competitive province. Individual business must have the right to open as the market dictates, and to make their own operating decisions.

## **Other**

### **Importance of Consultation**

The Chamber of Commerce believes that strong communities build a strong province. It is important that together, business organizations, community organizations and all levels of government recognize the significant role that we share in creating our future community. Open lines of communication and strong working relationships will enable us to achieve the common vision of our shared communities. The Chamber believes that throughout policy and legislation changes or development substantial, and meaningful consultation is imperative.

### **Recent Legislation Changes**

The Chamber continues to hear significant concerns about the impact to various business sectors of the Labour Code changes made last fall with the implementation of a Sunday shopping trial period. The changes were made without time for full consultations with the business community to provide input on the implications and costs of such measures. Such over arching changes that impact business competitiveness need to be discussed fully with all affected stakeholders. This is necessary to ensure that the impacts are understood and changes are implemented in a time frame to minimize negative impacts to competitiveness.

## **Conclusion**

As well as the above noted specific areas of Chamber advocacy for 2004, the Chamber will continue supporting the healthy workforce initiative with our members and the broader business community.

Full text versions of all the Chamber's policy work is available on our website at: [www.halifaxchamber.com](http://www.halifaxchamber.com) under the heading "policy updates".