



*HRM by Design:  
The Downtown Halifax Plan*

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### ***Introduction***

Downtown Halifax is the economic, cultural and social engine of the Maritime Provinces, yet despite this it had been kept from reaching its full potential by an out-dated planning strategy and land use bylaw, which were 35 and 60 years old respectively. They were written in bygone eras to address out-dated challenges no longer relevant to the city. These documents contained vague and contradictory guidance, resulting in development becoming mired in lengthy interpretations, often followed by lengthy appeals. The approval process could last from one to four years, and the approval body was the 23-member Regional Council whose members are not typically trained in architecture, urban design or city planning. Lack of design oversight resulted in regrettable architecture more often than not, fomenting anti-development attitudes amongst the public. The tragic result was that prospective development was driven to the suburbs or to other cities, and Halifax sat-out the period of growth enjoyed by other Canadian municipalities over the past 15 years. After engaging in some difficult but much needed “constructive candour” about these problematic policies, the Regional Municipal Planning Strategy directed that a new detailed downtown urban design plan be undertaken. That plan came to be known as “HRM by Design: The Downtown Halifax Plan,” and is the subject of this submission.

The creation of the HRM by Design downtown plan began in mid-2006 and went into effect in late-2009. It embodies three years of extensive public consultation in combination with an extraordinary and sustained effort by a core group of municipal staff. To assist in this effort a citizen-volunteer Urban Design Task Force was appointed by Council, and a consultant team was hired to assist with the early stages of the project. The resulting Plan delivers the following components:

- A 25 year-vision for the city as expressed in a new Municipal Planning Strategy;
- A new Land Use Bylaw;
- A new “Design Manual” of design guidelines for architecture, streetscape and public space design;
- A municipal capital improvement strategy;
- The city’s first-ever heritage conservation district with associated grants and incentives;
- A new design-based development approval process that returns decisions in 60 days;
- A new Density Bonusing program that delivers public amenities, and;
- The city’s first-ever Design Review Committee, comprised of citizen volunteers.

HRM by Design marks a fundamental shift toward design-based urban sustainability and is a historic piece of city-making. The project cost was a remarkably lean \$500,000, exclusive of staff time. The Plan incorporates a number of creative and innovative initiatives that are sure to create long-lasting change within Halifax Regional Municipality. The Plan has created a new planning regime to address urban character, heritage preservation, livability, sustainability, and economic development.

Note: Complete project documentation may be found at [www.hrmbysdesign.ca](http://www.hrmbysdesign.ca).

### **1. BOLD: A New Planning Regime**

The HRM by Design Downtown Plan rebuilt an entire planning regime from scratch. This started by engaging the community in a three year consultation program to determine a new 25 year vision. That was followed by the creation of new regulations and a new heritage conservation district. And finally a new “Site Plan Approval” development approval process was established that for the first time gives the city powers of design review. To achieve this power it was necessary to pass “Bill 181 – HRM by Design,” at the Provincial Legislature, enabling design control and the creation of a decision-making Design Review Committee. Under this process approval is granted by the new design review committee in just 60 days, and results in projects of the highest possible quality. Despite the current recession, the new plan and process have precipitated a rush of development application activity since they went into effect seven months ago.

### **2. EXECUTION: Process of Implementation**

Public Consultation for HRM by Design set new records for HRM in the thoroughness of the consultation and in the attendance numbers at public events. This did not happen by accident. Before the project got underway HRM’s urban design office began a series of public lectures on the value of urban design. Once the project began HRM held six multi-day public forums over the three year course of the project which provided every conceivable means for community members to make their voices heard. Project staff also conducted nearly 130 presentations and discussions with community and stakeholder groups. Quarterly newsletters, a project website, a series of “Fact Sheets” and a substantial media presence helped to communicate the evolving plan. In the end third party polls showed that a remarkable 80% of the public supported the final plan, and it was swept into effect by City Council with a vote of 20-to-1. The community recognizes this plan as their own, and as a result they support it overwhelmingly.

### **3. IMPACT:**

#### **a) Improved Urban Character**

HRM by Design maintains and protects the historic compact city grid and enhances it by replacing the old mosaic of separated land use zones with one mixed-use zone. All uses are located within easy walking distance of each other, and the walkability of streets is improved through a variety of capital improvement programs and developer-paid public art and streetscape improvements through the new Density Bonus program. Astonishingly the 260 acre Downtown Plan area contains 51 acres of vacant, developable land that will accommodate a substantial urban infill program. In a bold move the Plan eliminates all requirements for vehicular parking, leaving only the provision of bicycle parking as mandatory. Growth and change will be of the highest possible design and material quality due to a new form-based land use by-law which is complemented and a detailed new graphic “Design Manual.” The Design Manual prescribes performance standards for buildings, public spaces, heritage-related development, green design and construction, and will be administered by a new volunteer Design Review Committee comprised of local design professionals. .

#### **b) Protecting Our Built Heritage**

Halifax is a historic port city with its Georgian architecture and intimately scaled block structure going back to its founding in 1749. HRM by Design upholds and enhances treasured view protection provisions and the pedestrian scale of the original grid. The Plan created the city’s first ever Heritage Conservation District, and fast-tracks the creation of two more districts within 18 months. Together these districts encompass 70% of the registered heritage properties in the downtown. These districts protect the heritage heart of the city, and provide demolition prohibitions that are carefully balanced with a generous program of grants and tax incentives. In existence for only seven months the first district has surpassed all expectations with numerous projects coming forward to restore long-dormant heritage gems.

#### **c) Sustainability**

The greatest sustainability benefit of the Plan is the concentration of substantial new development on urban land that is already serviced by both hard infrastructure (roads, pipes, wires, transit, open space, schools) and soft infrastructure (shops,

restaurants, galleries, museums). Every square foot built downtown is a square foot that need not be built in an unserved automobile-based green field. HRM by Design encouraged families to move downtown by reducing the cost of housing through a number of measures including: no minimum unit size, no maximum residential density, and the absence of parking requirements. Additionally, the Density Bonus program rewards the provision of affordable housing with additional building height. As Halifax is a coastal city HRM by Design responds to sea level change by requiring all new habitable space to have a ground-floor finished floor elevation of at minimum 2.5 metres above the mean high water mark.

#### **4. COLLABORATION**

This project represents sweeping change to the way in which our city will grow for generations to come. Such change would have been impossible if not for a deliberate process of building partnerships and consensus over several years. This began within HRM amongst major departments and senior management in order to make sure HRM, as the agent of change, was speaking with a unified voice. This partnership building approach then extended to the three levels of government, including having provincial and federal representation sitting in the project's steering committee. And finally it extended into the community and built trust amongst business, the development industry, major institutions, NGOs, heritage advocates, community groups, and individuals. The reward for this collaborative approach was an 80% approval rating from the community, and a landslide approval of the Plan by Regional Council.

#### **5. INNOVATION**

This Plan represents dramatic change in every aspect of the municipality's planning and development operations for the urbanized core. The Plan's major innovations have been discussed throughout the submission and are listed here for clarity:

- HRM's first-ever Heritage Conservation District
- HRM's first Design Review Committee, to which Council has handed its decision-making powers
- Replacement of separated land use zones with a single mixed use zone
- Replacement of a 60 year old Land Use Bylaw and a 35 year old Municipal Plan
- New Density Bonus program yielding developer-paid public benefit
- New design-based regulatory and approval regime
- New graphic urban design code, (the "Design Manual")
- A built form approach maximizing sunlight penetration and minimizing wind and shadow impact
- Green roofs for all flat roofs
- Removal of all parking requirements leaving only bicycle parking as mandatory
- Commercially operated surface parking lots no longer permitted
- Replacement of a fractious multi-year approval process with a clear and predictable 60 day process
- A Plan Monitoring program requiring 5-year plan reviews based on Social, Economic and Environmental Benchmarks
- Record setting public consultation program

#### **6. REPLICABILITY: Transferability to Other Local Governments**

HRM by Design makes a number of practical innovations in the fields of city planning and urban design that, due to the Plan's straightforward ease of use and clarity of meaning, are readily transportable to other locales. Because of the Plan's fundamental switch in emphasis from use-based planning to design-based planning, it is on the leading edge of municipal planning in North America. As news of HRM by Design's new Downtown Plan spreads, planning staff are being increasingly contacted by staff from other municipalities across the country.

## 8. RESULT

<b>Before HRM by Design:</b>	<b>After HRM by Design:</b>
<u>Lack of community Vision:</u> The old plan and bylaw were 35 and 60 years old respectively. They were stale, written in bygone eras, and were concerned primarily with separation of uses.	<u>A clear and compelling Vision:</u> Of a sustainable, dense, livable, walkable, beautiful and bustling city. Incredibly, this vision is supported by 80% of residents according to third party polling.
<u>Growth vs. Heritage protection:</u> A fractious and deeply entrenched rift between pro-growth and pro-heritage camps lasting decades. This was publically played out in the media, sending “Halifax is anti-growth” signals far afield.	<u>Growth balanced with Heritage protection:</u> HRM by Design establishes unprecedented heritage protection within heritage districts while promoting significant but well-designed growth outside of the heritage districts through a streamlined approvals process.
<u>Vague and ambiguous policies:</u> Planning and development policies were 35 to 60 years old, had been deeply complicated by repeated amendments, and were open to multiple interpretations resulting in growth being mired in appeals and counter-appeals.	<u>Clear and predictable planning and development policies:</u> New Policies make clear to the applicant and the community precisely what is allowed, and have resulted in a surge of major applications since adoption.
<u>Lack of heritage protection:</u> Only extremely modest grants were available, and demolition controls were weak resulting in empty, decaying buildings eventually being demolished.	<u>Robust heritage protection:</u> Plan established first-ever conservation districts, along with heritage design guidelines, substantial grants & incentives, and demolition prohibitions.
<u>Lack of guidance on matters of design:</u> 60 years of unregulated architectural & streetscape design had marred the downtown.	<u>Design Manual + new Design Review Committee:</u> New Plan is a fundamental shift to design-based regulation.
<u>Population loss:</u> Between 1961 and 2001 the population of the Halifax Peninsula dropped from 92,000 to 61,000 people resulting in struggling businesses, school closures, and under-utilized infrastructure.	<u>More people living &amp; working downtown:</u> HRM by Design creates opportunity for 3 million sf of office/commercial and housing for 16,000 residents in a livable, walkable city.
<u>Lack of capital investment in the public realm:</u> Moribund streetscapes, under-utilized public spaces, disproportionate share of taxes spent in suburban areas.	<u>Multi-year downtown capital improvement program:</u> Plan re-establishes the importance of downtown as region’s engine, and directs significant streetscape/open space investment.
<u>Net Result:</u> Development driven to suburbs, population in decline, downtown in decline, lack of optimism for city.	<u>Net Result:</u> A new optimism is felt everywhere and a downtown renaissance is under way.

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### 3.1 PROJECT LOCATION MAP: HALIFAX REGIONAL MUNICIPALITY, NOVA SCOTIA

The Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) has a population of approximately 390,000 in more than 200 communities spread over 1.5 million acres, with 1,400 miles of coastline. However, the economic, cultural and social hub of the city, the seat of municipal and provincial government and employment is Downtown Halifax, which is the focus of HRMbyDesign.

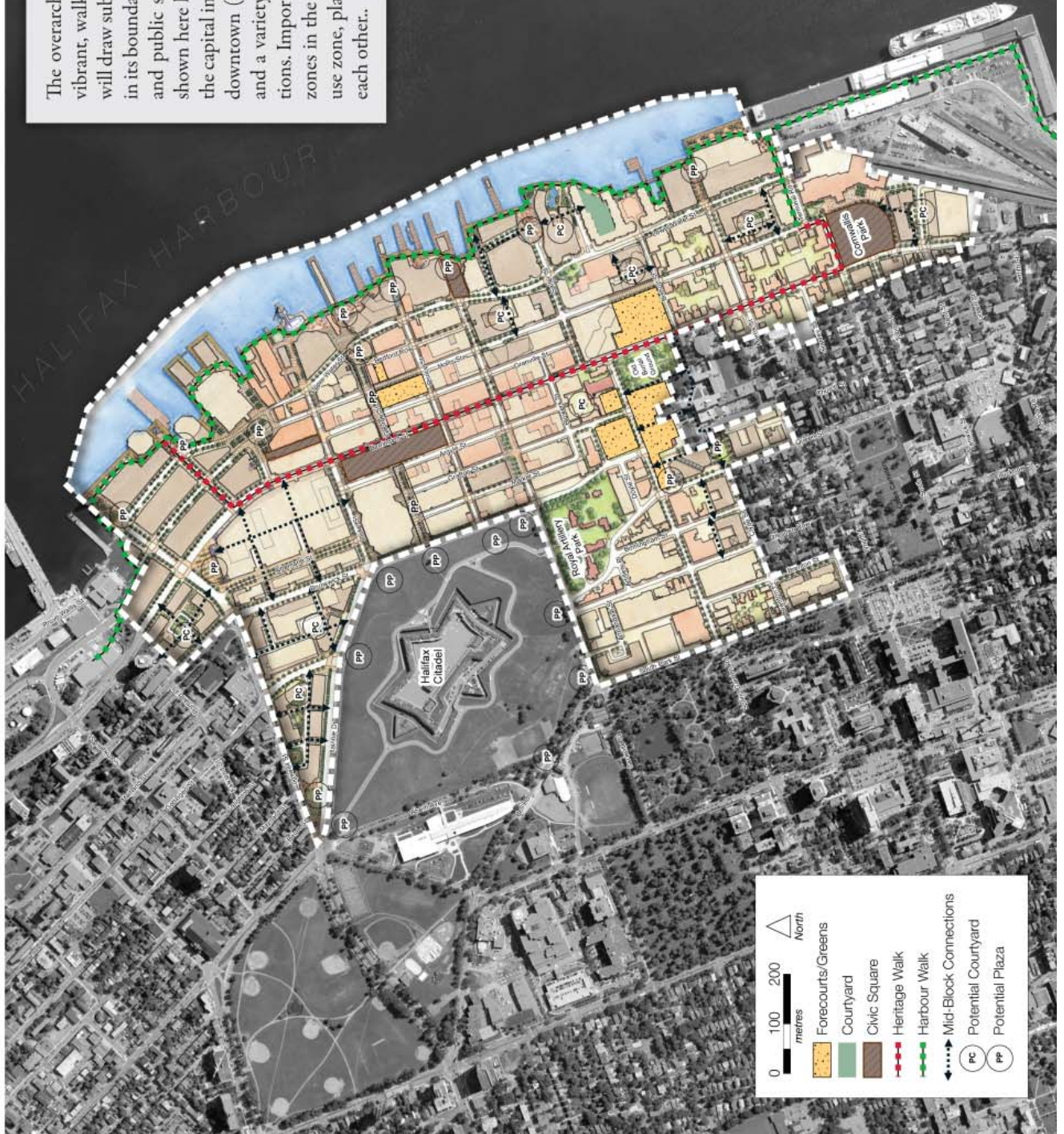


Location of Nova Scotia and Halifax

Location of HRMbyDesign area

### 3.2 DOWNTOWN CONCEPT PLAN

The overarching intent of HRMbyDesign is to create a vibrant, walkable, sustainable, mixed-use downtown that will draw substantially more people to live and work within its boundaries. The focus is on high quality architecture and public space/streetscape design. The Concept Plan shown here highlights the pedestrian-oriented aspects of the capital improvement plan: the "Heritage Walk" (green line), downtown (red line), the "Harbour Walk" (green line), and a variety of other pedestrian amenities and connections. Importantly, the mosaic of old single-use, separated zones in the old plan has been replaced with one mixed-use zone, placing all uses within easy walking distance of each other.



satellite imagery from bing maps

### 3.3 HERITAGE RESOURCES AND CONSERVATION DISTRICTS



# Downtown Halifax Site Plan Approval Process

## Substantive Applications

Planning Services

