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Item No.

**Halifax Regional Council
February 26, 2008**

TO: Mayor Kelly and Members of Halifax Regional Council

SUBMITTED BY:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paul Dunphy".

Paul Dunphy, Director, Community Development

DATE: December 11, 2007

SUBJECT: Community Visioning Pilot Project Evaluation

INFORMATION REPORT

ORIGIN

- September 19, 2006 - Regional Council initiated Community Visioning as a pilot project for the communities of Bedford Waterfront, Fall River and Musquodoboit Harbour
- November 30, 2006 - VisionHRM officially launched in the pilot communities
- July 18, 2007 - Community Liaison Groups from pilot communities presented draft Visions and Action Plans to Regional Plan Advisory Committee
- August-September 2007 - VisionHRM Pilot Project evaluated
- October 17, 2007 - Regional Plan Advisory Committee endorsed in principle the Community Visions and Action Plans for the pilot communities
- October 30, 2007 - Regional Council endorsed in principle the Community Visions and Action Plans and recommended these plans be considered in the HRM Business Planning and Budget Process, beginning with the 2008/09 cycle
- December 19, 2007 - VisionHRM Pilot Project draft evaluation report circulated to Regional Plan Advisory Committee

BACKGROUND/DISCUSSION

This report summarizes an evaluation of the Community Visioning pilot project. The evaluation is based on input from Community Liaison Group (CLG) members, VisionHRM project staff, program participants including residents and other stakeholders, and HRM staff and councillors. Additional sources of information include surveys (of recognition) from the Annual Multicultural Festival and a Bedford Sackville Weekly News online poll, and documentation of the program maintained by project staff.

An evaluation of the pilot project was used to determine the effectiveness of the Community Visioning process as a public engagement tool and to make recommendations for program improvements for delivery of a longer-term community visioning program for HRM.

The design of the evaluation framework began with the performance measures set out by Council upon program initiation in September 2006 (see attachment A). These measures were expanded to look at the entire visioning process and were grouped based on accepted goals of public engagement.

The evaluation addressed four key areas: information provision, community mobilization, consensus building, and community capacity building. Specifically, it examined:

- Communication - the amount and clarity of information
- Participation - the opportunities, significance, and effectiveness of participation
- Organization - support and coordination of staff
- Education - increased capacity of the community and staff
- Achievements - the outcomes of the program

(For more information, Attachment "B" reveals the results of the evaluation in detail organized by the headings - Communication; Participation; Organization; Education; Achievements. A brief summary, including project successes and areas for improvement is provided below)

The evaluation was conducted using questionnaires. Respondents completed the questionnaires either on-line or by telephone interview. A student from Dalhousie University's School of Planning was hired to undertake the evaluation.

Summary of Findings

A 5-month public engagement program resulted in three Visions and Action Plans in keeping with concepts set out for these communities in the enabling policy document, the Regional Plan. The visioning program, guided by the Community Development Department, worked well to achieve VisionHRM objectives. Three Community Liaison Groups (CLGs) made up of residents, along with

participants and project staff all felt they learned about their community, its history and the people who live there. Additionally these groups felt they learned and were able to apply varied skills. Participants also felt they learned more about HRM through the Community Visioning program.

Residents got involved with the program after word of mouth communication, in addition to print communication efforts. Though they participated, some residents remained unclear on what the expected goals and outcomes of the program were. In addition to public meetings, posting to or viewing the VisionHRM website was a significant form of participation. The vast majority of participants, non-participants, and CLG members felt they would participate in the future, possibly including implementation of the Visions and Action Plans.

Project Successes

Overall the findings of the evaluation are a good indication the Community Visioning program was successful in its mandate to engage the public in developing a Vision and Action Plan for their community. Demonstrating the program's success in empowering residents, is the almost 90% of Community Liaison Group (CLG) members who felt they had a great deal of control in designing the public engagement process.

The majority of participants (74%), non-participants (63%), and CLGs (65%) wishing to participate in the future should be recognized as an accomplishment of VisionHRM. Another key to the program's success is the indication of confidence by participants, CLG members and project staff in the Visions and Action Plans. The learnings during the pilot program, both successful and otherwise, will serve to enhance the program for future participating communities in the HRM.

Following are some of the highlights which speak to the project's success:

1. The VisionHRM website received more than 25,000 hits, and more than 10,000 hits occurred on each of the related community websites during the engagement process.
2. 85% of HRM staff respondents knew of the VisionHRM project, and 60% felt they could redirect queries about VisionHRM to the proper division.
3. 68% of community participants felt the process was open and transparent.
4. 58% of participants that had been involved with other HRM initiatives said Community Visioning was a better experience.
5. CLG members and staff indicated gaining technical skills and growing personally and professionally through the program.
6. Most respondents felt the visions and action plans to be mostly representative of the community.
7. The majority of respondents indicated a mostly feasible or completely feasible Action Plan was developed.

Suggested Program Modifications

Based on information gathered during the evaluation, several suggestions for program improvement have emerged. Broadly these suggestions are as follows:

1. Ensure clear communication of project goals and outcomes; increase the amount and quality of information distributed regarding the project (both internally and externally).
2. Aim to increase representative public participation, through communication with diverse groups.
3. Provide clear and accurate information about the level of volunteer commitment required for participation on a Community Liaison Group; ensure the number and frequency of CLG meetings is acceptable and manageable for volunteers and staff.
4. Continue collaboration between Community Developers and Community Planners on the project team; increase structured interaction with other HRM divisions particularly on the connections between VisionHRM and work of other divisions.
5. Improve the functionality of the Community Visioning Tool Kit; include information to clarify the scope and basic goals of community visioning, explain expected project outcomes/achievements, and provide sufficient tools, resources and training to design and carry out a community visioning process.
6. Use information gathered about educational and experiential outcomes for promotion of VisionHRM; encourage continued reflection on lessons learned through the process; evaluate engagement exercises throughout the engagement process.
7. Develop guidelines to assess the Vision's representation of the community and the general feasibility of the Action Plan.
8. Endeavour to complete necessary pre-requisite studies, such as watershed studies, in advance of the visioning process.

As the VisionHRM project team prepares to begin visioning and work to support the next communities, all suggested program modifications will be considered and incorporated to the greatest extent possible. Future/ongoing evaluations will continue to be used to measure program success.

BUDGET IMPLICATIONS

No budget implications. Costs associated with improvements or adjustments to the Community Visioning program as discussed in this report that are within budgeted project scope will be allocated from Community Development approved 2007/08 Capital Account CDV00738. Any new requirements or changes for 2008-09 fiscal will require budget approval. Community Development will identify and evaluate any new incremental expenditures for review and consideration as part of the 2008/09 budget process.

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT POLICIES / BUSINESS PLAN

This report complies with the Municipality's Multi-Year Financial Strategy, the approved Operating, Capital and Reserve budgets, policies and procedures regarding withdrawals from the utilization of Capital and Operating reserves, as well as any relevant legislation.

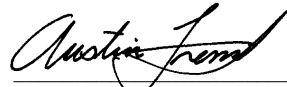
ATTACHMENTS

- Attachment A: Pilot Project: General Performance Measures (Report to Regional Council dated, September 19, 2006)
Attachment B: Community Visioning Pilot Project Evaluation Findings

A copy of this report can be obtained online at <http://www.halifax.ca/council/agendasc/cagenda.html> then choose the appropriate meeting date, or by contacting the Office of the Municipal Clerk at 490-4210, or Fax 490-4208.

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Attachment A
Pilot Project: General Performance Measures
(Initiation Report to Council: September 19, 2006)

The pilot communities will be evaluated using a variety of methods including community surveys and key stakeholder interviews. Additional performance measures could include the number and variety of groups and individuals participating, media exposure, and number of submissions received. At a minimum, the Community Liaison Group (CLG) in each pilot community and key community stakeholders will be polled at the end of the process.

Performance measures which could be considered:

1. Majority of people in the pilot community are aware of the community visioning process
2. Number of hits on the Community Visioning website and in the media
3. Community stakeholders feel they gained greater understanding of the economic, environmental, social and cultural aspects of their community
4. Community stakeholders feel they gained greater understanding of local government
5. Majority of people think the process was open and transparent
6. Majority of people think the process was representative (including interest, neighbourhoods, gender, age, tenure, culture, income levels)
7. Vision statement is representative of desired community future and endorsed by Community Liaison Group
8. Community stakeholders think the action plan represents an achievable and financially feasible blueprint for realizing the community's vision, a framework for community planning and HRM business planning
9. A number of the small and/or short term issues have been resolved
10. Appropriate business units actively participated at critical stages of the project
11. The process fostered development of community capacity and creative partnerships which did not exist before
12. Participants feel they had the opportunity to contribute to the design of the process and to make meaningful decisions about their community
13. Majority of participants would like to continue to be involved in future community planning and action plan implementation

**Attachment B
Community Visioning Pilot Project Evaluation Findings**

Communication

Information distribution began in participating communities in October 2006. A comprehensive effort was made by both VisionHRM staff and the CLGs to increase awareness of the program, opportunities to participate, and progress. Despite many efforts in print communication, word of mouth was cited most often as the way participants, public surveyed at the Multicultural Fair, and HRM staff heard about the project. Newspapers, the HRM website, mailings, and e-mail were also commonly acknowledged. The VisionHRM website received more than 25,000 hits since its creation, and more than 10,000 hits occurred on each of the related community websites. Participants suggested improving communications through physical location or methods, often reiterating those already being used, and indicated more information, more often would be appreciated.

Although there was significant project promotion, two surveys revealed a large percentage of people were unfamiliar with VisionHRM. 30% of 121 people surveyed at the Multicultural Festival knew about the project, and the Bedford Sackville Weekly indicates 38% of those surveyed online are familiar with Community Visioning. (It is worthy of note the majority of people at the Multicultural Festival were from urban Dartmouth and Halifax and not from areas experiencing VisionHRM. The accuracy of the Bedford Sackville Weekly survey is unknown). More promisingly, 85% of HRM staff respondents knew of VisionHRM, and 60% felt they could redirect queries about VisionHRM to the proper division.

Clarity is another important aspect of communication. Although most participants and CLGs thought they understood the goals of VisionHRM either completely or for the most part, 40% and 44%, respectively, felt neutral about their understanding. This contrasts the way staff perceived the CLG understood the goals – where 75% indicated CLGs understood completely or for the most part, and 25% fell in the neutral range. The most cited suggestion for improving clarity of the goals related to the need to better clarify intended project outcomes. Another group that could benefit from improved clarity was HRM staff, particularly on the connections between the project and their divisions' work.

Project staff consistently felt they were slightly more clear in the kickoff, training day, toolkit, and informal dialog than the CLGs felt. The CLGs expressed information overload in the training day and toolkit, as well as the need for a clearer process and language. The majority of participants were satisfied with the clarity and timeliness of notices they received on Community Visioning meetings and workshops. Improving the content of notices to give context to the project – what communities, what the goals are, who's involved, and simple language were all suggested by participants, CLGs, and project staff.

Participation

The CLGs chose different ways to engage the public with an average of 8 events in each community during the process. 83% of participants thought meeting times were convenient and 68% felt similarly about locations. Varying the night meetings are held on, and limiting events in the summer could improve convenience. People that chose not to participate had other commitments (38%), were not aware of participation opportunities (17%), or felt events were inconvenient (14%). Between 168 and 215 participants were recorded at Visioning events in the three communities, and many more people interacted at Bedford Days, Keloose, and the Eastern Shore Summer Fair. 142 people registered as online forum members. Each community had well over 250 views per discussion post, with the Bedford Waterfront averaging 657 views per post.

The public was invited to apply to be a CLG member, and an attempt was made to balance certain categories (age, gender, area of interest, for example), while giving points for others (racially visible person, person with a disability, having school-aged children, availability to volunteer, among others).

- CLGs and participants were made up of a higher percentage of older cohorts than the average of the three communities.
- Home ownership was between 10% and 15% higher for CLGs and participants than the average community.
- University attendance was about 35% higher for CLGs and participants than the average community.
- 41% of CLG members felt they were representing an interest, commonly youth, seniors, real estate, environment, and commercial development; 58% of participants felt they represented an interest – seniors, transportation, community, and environment, being the most cited.
- Participants, CLGs, and staff indicated increased public participation is something to pursue.
- Better communication, a clear statement of the process, and some sign of the outcomes were suggested to attract more people in the future.

68% of participants felt the process was open and transparent. Participants, CLGs, and project staff were asked to rate how meaningful or effective they felt participation was through a number of methods. Almost consistently, project staff rated effectiveness higher than participants or the CLGs. Staff highly rated group discussion, while participants and CLGs rated focus groups highest, and these two methods received all positive comments. Mapping and 3-D modeling were also well liked, and modeling, along with artists' renderings were suggested to occur earlier. Concerns arose over deleted posts in the online forum, categorization and multiple voting in the dotmocracy exercise, and unexciting images in the visual preference surveys. Comments on overall participation were extremely positive, expressing gratitude people had the opportunity for input, and encouraging the process to continue.

74% of participants felt that they would participate in the future. 63% of non-participants felt the same under ideal conditions, and 65% of CLGs felt similarly. General interest, the Vision's future, giving input, enjoying the process, and caring about community were reasons for continued participation. Frustration with HRM and the process, other commitments, and confusing community boundaries were reasons people would not be participating. 58% of participants that had been involved with other HRM initiatives said that Community Visioning was a better experience.

Organization

This section deals with support and coordination for those directly involved with the program.

Half of the CLGs reported borderline unmanageable time commitments and workloads. Many did not realize the time needed, thought time management skills should be discussed, and some felt an earlier start and longer time frame would be beneficial. Staff agreed weekly CLG meetings were too often, preferring bi-weekly meetings, however felt their workload was mostly manageable. Staff indicated budgeting could be improved for effective communications, artists' renderings, and infrastructure, environmental, or other studies. CLGs, participants, and staff advocated for a greater sense of support and communication with Council. CLGs indicated they would like to see HRM Web Services and Corporate Communications take on a more direct role with the CLG and improved technological support from Web Services. Staff highly rated the work of consultants to create renderings, but feedback from the CLGs indicated the consulting process for Vision renderings should start earlier, and be more involved with the CLG and community.

88% of the CLG felt they had most control over designing the public consultation process, an indication of the project's success in empowering residents. 76% of CLGs rated project staff's helpfulness as outstanding. Positive comments indicated staff's willingness to help, commitment and dedication to the process, knowledge, patience, professionalism, and trustworthiness. Suggestions for improving assistance to the CLGs included mixed views on increased leadership and direction, or not leading too much and maintaining neutrality. Including an urban design professional on the team was also suggested.

Project staff were generally very happy with the coordination between Community Relations and Regional and Community Planning. They learned about, grew in respect for, and brought together each other's work. However, at some stages in the project, some expressed frustration with time frames, project coordination and scope, and the feasibility of recommendations. These frustrations were overcome through teamwork, explaining the project scope, and team member discussion. 70% of staff rated communication on the Visioning team as outstanding or good. Staff advised better team communication, and debriefings after community meetings to plan for next steps. Staff emphasized the importance for all team members to be at these meetings as decisions are made and advice is sought.

Project staff also interacted with HRM staff from other divisions. 28% of HRM staff survey respondents interacted with project staff through information sessions, the Regional Plan Advisory Committee, and discussions. 61% of HRM staff that responded to the survey felt their division should be more involved in Community Visioning, sometimes directly, but often they wanted more information on the program, as their division would be involved during implementation. Project staff indicated they interacted with certain divisions, but felt the need for further development of a structure for interaction.

Education

84% of participants expected to learn about their community during VisionHRM. They and CLGs learned about the history of their community, their fellow residents, the built community, social groups, and their community's future. Despite meeting many people during the process, 50% of participants were not sure if any creative partnerships were formed amongst fellow residents, groups, or businesses during VisionHRM.

CLG members and staff indicated gaining technical skills and growing personally and professionally through the program. Responses included meeting people and improving social skills, leadership roles and gaining trust, and the challenges of working in a group. Time management, adapting to situations, learning about the HRM, planning processes, and local government were also mentioned. Web training, mapping, and PowerPoint were among the technical skills gained.

Participants, CLG members, and project staff were asked about the best experience they had during the Visioning process. The following are some of the answers people provided:

“Finding common ground with others on topics of interest.”- Participant

“The world café meeting because it was really effective.”- Participant

“Probably the first night when a crowd showed up to see just what this vision thing was all about and actually complimented us on how well we had advertised the event and made it interesting for those attending.” – CLG member

“I think it had to be making the timeline of our community because so many people got some benefit from it.” – CLG member

“Getting to know a new group of residents in a community where I had not worked before and learning some really wonderful things about that community.”- Project staff member

Best experiences generally covered meeting people and learning about the community, getting to share ideas and give input, a particular topic that was discussed, a particular event or public engagement method, leading the process, and the whole experience. It is evident from the things people learned about their community, technical aspects, and from their anecdotes of positive experiences that capacity was built in the community through public participation or being a Community Liaison Group member, and in the HRM staff working on the project.

Achievements

Each community drafted a Vision and Action Plan. Participants, CLG members, and project staff were asked to rate the representativeness of their Community Vision. About 15% of CLGs and 5% of participants felt their community's Vision was completely representative. Most responses felt it was mostly representative. Staff commented there was good representation, or thought the Vision was a good starting point for further discussion and planning processes. Some participants were skeptical as to the real wants of the community, and some CLGs felt some members went too far in getting their own ideas in the Vision.

CLGs and staff were asked to rate the feasibility of Action Plan. 30% of CLGs felt they were completely feasible. The majority of responses indicated a mostly feasible Action Plan. Staff commented that at this time the Action Plans still need to be finalized – they were too detailed, needed refining, or needed some financial, technical, or political testing. CLG members were worried about the lack of resources for Action Plan implementation. Participants were eager to see results start occurring from the Vision and Action Plan.

Finally, the products were examined in relation to the Regional Municipal Planning Strategy. The Bedford Waterfront is designated as a Suburban Local Centre and falls within the proposed Halifax Harbour Designation. Fall River is in the Rural Settlement Designation and is a Rural Commuter Local Centre. Musquodoboit Harbour is also in the Rural Settlement Designation and is a Rural Commuter District Centre. Since the Plan's policy for these designations is rather broad, the Visions and Action Plans are reasonably consistent with the recommendations of the Plan. Each community recommended similar land uses, environmental actions, and transportation options as their designations in the Plan. Furthermore, in presentations to the Regional Planning Advisory Committee, connections between the Regional Plan and each community's Visions and Action Plans were highlighted. It was clear the Regional Plan had been considered in all three communities' Visioning processes.

