

HALIFAX

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Item No. 2
Halifax Regional Council
May 21, 2019

TO: Mayor Savage and Members of Halifax Regional Council

SUBMITTED BY:

Original Signed by 

Jerry Blackwood, Director Corporate & Customer Services

Original Signed by 

Jacques Dubé, Chief Administrative Officer

DATE: April 17, 2019

SUBJECT: Affordable Access Program

INFORMATION REPORT

ORIGIN

February 7, 2017 Regional Council Motion:

Moved by Councillor Outhit and seconded by Councillor Mason that Halifax Regional Council ask staff to consider a 'Fair Entry Halifax' program, modeled on similar program in Calgary, so that applicants do not have to repeatedly demonstrate low income in order to qualify for municipally subsidized programs.

LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

34 (1) The Chief Administrative Officer is the head of the administrative branch of the government of the Municipality and is responsible to the Council for the proper administration of the affairs of the Municipality in accordance with the by-laws of the Municipality and the policies adopted by the Council.

BACKGROUND

The Municipality currently offers three income assistance programs for low income customers, including the: Low Income Transit Pass, Property Tax Exemption and Deferral Program, and Recreation Access Program. Previously, the process required the customer to apply and prove their financial need for each individual program. The new single-entry process, Affordable Access Program, is an improved model that streamlines the intake process to a single application.

DISCUSSION

Prior to the introduction of the Affordable Access Program, there were three programs with separate intake models requiring customers to drop individual applications off at different locations, or via different email and mail addresses. In 2018/19, approximately 3500 customers accessed the Property Tax Exemption and Deferral Program, 1300 for the Low-Income Transit Pass Program, and 400 used the Recreation Access Program.

As part of HRM's Performance Excellence program, the Affordable Access Program was led by the Organizational Performance Excellence (OPE) office within the Corporate & Customer Services Business Unit as a corporate-level project. Each of the three program administrators and their managers identified improvements a streamlined singular intake process could create for the customer.

The three Initial Programs that make up the "Affordable Access Program" include:

1. **Low Income Transit Pass Program:**
This is an annual program, with applicants applying in May or June for a July 1-June 30 year. Candidates must prove that their household income is at or below the low-income threshold, that they are Halifax residents, and that they are not receiving a transportation subsidy from another government program.
2. **Subsidized Recreation Programming:**
HRM Recreation offers numerous free and subsidized programs through a variety of registration approaches to promote active lifestyles for Halifax residents. To qualify for a subsidy, applicants must provide a Notice of Assessment, or alternately they may provide a letter from the Department of Community Services or from Immigration Services Association of Nova Scotia for newcomers, to demonstrate need.
3. **Partial Tax Exemption for Residential Taxation Program and the Tax Deferral Program**
The Municipality currently assists low income residents with paying their property tax through a payment plan, a partial tax exemption, or deferral of property taxes (payment is put off to a later date). These programs are available to all homeowners with a combined annual household income of \$34,000 or less. Applications to this program are collected between June and December of the year for which the taxes will be levied.

The three programs were chosen for this project because they are administered and funded exclusively by HRM – future improvements could include programs that are funded and administered by external organizations, for example the Senior Snow Clearance program.

The work resulted in the creation of the following customer-focussed documents:

- A single application form that contains the requirements for each of the existing program options;
- A single information package that outlines the eligibility criteria and required documents for each program option; and
- A single link on Halifax.ca housing the required documents and information pages on each of the 3 individual program options.

Customers can now apply for any or all of the programs through email, mail, or in person at one of our Customer Contact Centres or a number of our Community Recreation Facilities. This can be done any time of year, within the constraints of each individual program's deadlines. Starting May 21, 2019, applicants who want to re-apply for the 3 programs will now be applying through the new Affordable Access Program. Promotion for the new program will begin May 14, 2019, and that will be the portal to use for all three programs, effective immediately.

The project also facilitated a new administrative intake process that digitizes the intake as much as possible to improve our environmental footprint, but also reduce the number of unnecessary steps for staff. By creating a single application package, staff hours across the municipality conducting the same or similar

work for the individual programs is now reduced. Further, coordination between the Business Units ensures that all marketing is conducted together, and the messaging is consistent for our customers.

Benefits of the program to our customers:

- Reduced strain on HRM's low-income residents
- Improved service experience
- Improved access to services
- Improved experience interacting with HRM
- Improved privacy and protection of customer information

Benefits to the organization:

- Consistent definition and application of low-income qualifications
- Process efficiencies – reduction of red tape between Business Units
- Improved efficiency and financial performance
- Increased capacity for staff to process more applications

The benefits to the organization, specifically savings in staff time, will be measured by comparing multiple factors, including: time spent printing and processing hardcopies versus softcopies, time spent correcting errors/incomplete information, and the amount of time the new intake model for the single program takes versus the three individual programs.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial implications resulting from this report.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

There was no community engagement conducted for this report.

ATTACHMENTS

None

A copy of this report can be obtained online at halifax.ca or by contacting the Office of the Municipal Clerk at 902.490.4210.

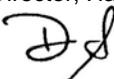
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