

**Memo 04 - Questions for Council Candidates (Halifax Chamber of Commerce)**

To: Nancy Bray, Halifax Chamber of Commerce Nancyb@HalifaxChamber.com  
Date: October 13, 2008 (mostly written on September 18, 2008) 902.481.1231

Please accept this in response to your emailed list of questions on September 10.

- Cameron Ells, P.Eng., Candidate for Council: District 12 - Downtown Halifax

## **1.0 Transportation**

**1.1 In the five year transit plan recently approved by Council, there are no solid plans for bus transit to the Halifax International Airport. Halifax is the only major Canadian city without transit to and from its airport. If you were elected to Council, how would you work to rectify this situation?**

When I fly into Montreal, the option exists to take public transit into the downtown for about \$2. I have done this, but more often than not, my time is tight I will use a taxi. My preferred option is to take the night train from Halifax and arrive at 9:00 am in downtown Montreal (and at its business center, and their bus and subway connections).

The current taxi fares from the airport to downtown are comparable to other cities.

Suggestions for improving the connection between Metro Transit and the airport are:

- initially seek to contract with the Airporter bus service to include a couple of major hubs in their route, such as at the Dartmouth Sportsplex or Mumford Rd.
- if the demand is perceived to exist, pilot test a limited contracted service that uses buses with luggage racks. Airport passengers will typically have more luggage than regular Metro Transit passengers.

**1.2 The \$27 million dollar Metro Transit Expansion Plan includes improvement and additions to bus routes. What do you think should be the priority areas for increased transit service?**

The priorities for Downtown Halifax relate to having the appropriate infrastructure in place as a starting and destination point for the increased levels of service. Within Downtown Halifax, increased weekend night bus capacity could probably be justified.

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### **1.3 Are you knowledgeable about the Atlantic Gateway Initiative? How do you think the city should support the Atlantic Gateway Initiative?**

I have a modest level of knowledge about the details of the Atlantic Gateway Initiative. Enhanced transportation connections have often been a sound investment, although the 19<sup>th</sup> century canal system in Nova Scotia did not prove to be one of them.

HRM can be supportive, but the most significant decision making and potential funding would be from others. The benefits of an active port and transportation links are self evident. Doing so in a way that results in less cargo being trucked through the downtown would increase the potential for public support for the project. HRM can make indirect contributions through the Port of Halifax. Perhaps in the long run, increased cargo traffic would merit some corresponding redevelopment of the railway serviced, industrial lands on the Dartmouth - Eastern Passage side of the harbour.

### **1.4 Do you believe that active transportation should be a municipal priority?**

Ongoing incremental increases in the capacity to use active transportation, especially with respect to bicycles, has public support in Downtown Halifax. The importance of this will grow as a component of municipal planning in the future. One can anticipate more mixed use residential - commercial - institutional land use neighborhoods in Downtown Halifax, on the peninsula, and in other parts of HRM.

This may reduce the current or historical capacity of some roads to have large trucks move container cargo. This may result in preferred corridors for cargo transportation, and preferred corridors for active transportation, and a less noticeable amount of truck traffic in areas that are becoming more residential.

Vehicular traffic on roads is the most significant transportation options in HRM, and this will not soon change. Roads, not ferries, not railways, not airplanes, but roads continue to be the most significant local transportation option. Municipal planning, and planning with respect to other projects such as Atlantic Gateway, should make provision or account for an ongoing incremental increase in bike lanes and other examples of increasing the capacity for local active transportation options.

On the peninsula, this may also increase the potential for some trucks in the future to use the existing rail line routes.

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### **2.0 Governance & Leadership**

#### **2.1 A good Councillor must be a strong community leader. When have you demonstrated strong community leadership in the past?**

I have been quietly influential in the development of contaminated sites guidelines, and the technical decision making tools commonly used on local brownfields redevelopment projects (ie. Atlantic RBCA). This has influenced millions of dollars of local spending.

As an individual, I have offered technical and policy comments, suggestions, and questions at conference, workshop, and public hearings.

Currently I am the elected President of the Environmental Services Association of Nova Scotia ([www.ESANS.ca](http://www.ESANS.ca)). Our next event is October 20-21, 2008 (Atlantic Reclamation Conference 2008) in association with the Canadian Lands Reclamation Association, and brings together public and private sector delegates. It is a sold out event.

In March 2008, I chaired the Steering Committee for the Atlantic Climate Change Conference held in Halifax. This also brought together delegates from the public and private sectors, students and universities, and non-governmental organizations.

#### **2.2. What do you see as the key role of Council? What do you see as the role of municipal staff?**

Regional Council has a governing role that in business is more similar to that of a Board of Directors rather than as senior management. Council members are elected by HRM residents. Directors are elected by corporate shareholders. The lead executive for HRM is the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) and for a business, it is the President.

Council / Directors are responsible for the selection of the CAO / President. Council / Directors provide strategic direction to the CAO / President and the staff for which the office of the CAO / President is responsible. This may be at the initiative of the Council or by selecting, supporting, or amending, options presented to it by the HRM CAO and staff. The most visible prioritizations of options occur during the annual budget process. Council provides a level of public accountability and responsibility for HRM activities. For the Voters / Shareholders attempting to navigate through HRM government on one topic or another, their members on Council / Board of Directors are their available, knowledgeable, ombudsmen - advocates.

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### **2.3. If elected, how would you communicate with your constituents?**

Communications would involve a mixture of the old media (ie. newspapers, radio, TV) and the new media (ie. email, web, social network, internet based). Communications would involve regular discussions with representatives of various groups and communities (ie. business, education, social, religious, and non-governmental organizations). Communications would involve discussions in the coffee shops, on the streets, in the library, in the board rooms, in the offices, and at the public meetings.

### **3.0 HRM by Design**

#### **3.1 What in your view is the main purpose of HRMbyDesign? Are you supportive of it?**

In my engineering design experience, available resources are most effectively used when one is seeking to achieve performance goals (ie. Design a bridge to support 20 rolling trucks) and not seeking to achieve prescriptive goals (ie. Build a bridge out of concrete with the following dimensions, so that 20 trucks can be supported). A bridge could take many potential forms to achieve the 20 truck goal, and which form is most effective might be influenced by the cost of cement in a year where the Sydney Tar Ponds project is increasing regional demand. Performance goals are more efficient.

I originally perceived HRM by Design as an effort to set performance goals to be achieved during future development and planning projects, in a process that included extensive local consultations. The perceived intent was to start with the "Capital District" of downtown Halifax, and then to repeat the process elsewhere in HRM (ie. use local Dartmouth or Bedford consultations in the setting of performance goals in those communities).

The draft results of the HRM by Design efforts include a comprehensive vision for the area, even if it sometimes seem more "aspirational" than currently practical. A final vision, dream or goal, does not have to be perfectly practical in order to provide a basis for some "along the way" decision making. The HRM by Design vision seems to rely on more prescriptive goals for future development, than I thought would be the case (ie. Use a preferred type of an awning or lettering over another).

Somewhere over the past couple of years, I started to also perceive the HRM by Design results as an imperfect but useful political compromise. This involved people generally supportive of potential development investments that would change the look of downtown Halifax, and people generally supportive of more rules to have property owners maintain the look, function, and structure of downtown Halifax buildings, even if the same property owners might prefer other options.

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My workshop participation and attendance at some public meetings left the impression that the HRM by Design process was being run by people seeking an endorsement for their already preferred outcomes of the process. For me, some of the text in the draft documents has a “boiler plate” or a “cut and paste from elsewhere” feel to it.

Where the option exists, I prefer the use of performance goals over prescriptive ones.

On balance, I am supportive of HRM by Design, and consider it a work in progress that already merits some revisions, but is also an improvement over the status quo.

### **3.2 What are your views on development in the downtown core?**

There is a natural life cycle - birth or new combinations of resources, growth, maturity, decline, and a final recycle or a resorting of resources. This is in mother nature, in organizations, in business, in sports team performances, and more.

The downtown core, some 250 years ago, was a predominantly military place that eventually changed. Later it would be a predominately wooden ship based mercantile place that changed. It was later on an industrial area, with strong and sometimes unpleasant odours, that eventually changed. It was a prime commercial area, with people using street cars, that eventually changed.

Government, university, creative, private sector, and transportation hub support services are now the most substantial component of activity in the downtown core, and there is a growing residential population. It is part of yet another cycle of activity, where parts of the past mix with the present and future. Buildings are influenced by the purpose and people associated with them, and by the available materials, technology, and economics. With more options, there can be a greater variety in the outcomes.

Downtown core service activities, with improvements in transportation options and public safety, and a growing residential density, provide interesting opportunities for sustainable, long term, mixed use (residential - commercial - institutional) neighbourhoods.

This is a long term vision, with a desire for a community that makes the most effective use of available resources including energy. The regional municipal government can make its most effective contributions to this vision, with long term sustainable physical, policy and service infrastructure, that increases the opportunities for people to “do their own thing” and decreases the transition costs to people from a natural cycle of change.

### **4.0 Tax Reform**

#### **4.1 Do you believe that municipal tax reform is necessary now in HRM?**

Imagine an individual municipal tax bill that is structured like a restaurant, cable, or utility bill, with an identification of the specific and desired HRM services provided to that local community, and corresponding charges for each menu item being received. Telephone, electricity, water, and cable TV bills are structured this way, and reforming the municipal tax system could have a similar result.

HRM is not a one size fits all municipality. There are many different communities who desire varying levels of municipal services. HRM is essentially in the business of providing varying levels of desired services (ie. Transportation, water, sewer, solid waste, police, fire, libraries, recreation opportunities, some housing, social and economic development opportunities, snow removal, and more).

A municipal tax bill could be in a menu format style similar to what is used for cable TV or restaurant bills. This would more clearly show what is being received for what the tax bill being paid. This could clearly note the services being received that are specific to a local community (ie. professional vs. volunteer fire fighting; sidewalk snow removal - yes or no) and general services common to all communities within HRM (ie. Payment to the provincial government for provincially provided services).

Greater clarity in what services are being received in exchange for what tax is being paid, is perceived as an effective response to both of the current "urban" and "rural" criticisms of HRM. It may also improve how people relate to various HRM activities.

#### **4.2 If you do believe that tax reform is necessary, what reforms are you supportive of?**

Over time, property taxes have become the most significant source of revenue, and also a too significant source of revenue. I support reforms that better result in tax payments being based on community specific and general services received (ie. similar to bills received for water, telephone, cable, and electricity services). Where services can be more efficiently provided (ie. to people living in apartment buildings), lower taxes and rents should be their reward.

#### **4.3 Are you aware of and do you support the reforms currently proposed by the Municipal Tax Reform Committee?**

I attended a public open house event that presented proposals by this committee. At this meeting, I liked some but not all of the draft proposals presented for discussion.