



*"for the use of the inhabitants of the town of Halifax as Common forever" (1763-2013)*

## **Submission to Centre Plan May 31<sup>th</sup>, 2016**

### **RE: Halifax Common, open space, landscaped open space and parks**

**Introduction:** The evidence is ever stronger that there are environmental, economic, social and cultural benefits to public open space, landscaped open space, parks etc. An economic fact sheet produced by Landscape Ontario based on information from Project Evergreen has many examples of the economic, social and psychological benefits from green space. See details at <https://landscapeontario.com/the-financial-benefits-of-green-spaces>

Beyond direct economic contribution from the landscaping industry and direct improvement of property value there are multiple benefits. Businesses with vegetation can benefit because they are easier to find, and when well-landscaped tend to carry better products, that is the appearance of landscaping of vegetation acts as a cue to quality. This translates into increased sales.

Vegetation can produce energy savings, protect drainage systems, increase rentals, increase community pride and perception of an area and therefore act as a draw to businesses. A view of vegetation outside reduces job stress for workers and results in greater job satisfaction than those workers with views of man-made objects or no view. As well these workers with a view of vegetation are more productive.

Preserving and expanding open space as the population grows is essential. It is estimated that 15-20,000 additional people will live on the Halifax Peninsula by 2030. Granted by King George III in 1763, the 240 acre Halifax Common was designated as a historic site under the City charter in 1971. With proper planning, protection and regulations it can continue to provide vital "breathing space" for present and future commoners and for those who work and visit the heart of the Halifax Peninsula. Asks related to the Centre Plan take guidance from the 1994 Halifax Common Plan. These should be incorporated into a masterplan for the Common in its entirety.

While the focus of this submission is on the Halifax Common city-wide there is a need to protect existing open green space and trees and create more green space. Protection of green space also needs to incorporate protection of blue space, that is views of open skies for enjoyment and experience of public space and practically for access to sun for passive and active solar energy.

## 1. Representation of the Halifax Common

The label “Halifax Commons” written on the location of the North Common on Centre Plan Base Map 2 is incorrect. As well on page 15 of the Planning Workbook the current land use key breaks the Halifax Common into segments, for example the North and part of the Central Common are referred to as “park” other segments are identified as “commercial”, “mixed use”, “institutional,” “cemetary,” or “parking”. This is also incorrect in that it misrepresents the intent of the goals and objectives of the **1994 Halifax Common Plan** which commit the City (now HRM) to the following:

Section 2.1: The amount of public open space in the Halifax Common will not be decreased.

Section 3.1: The amount of land owned by the City of Halifax will not be decreased.

Section 3.2: The city will seek to increase the amount of land under city ownership through recapture of Halifax Common lands.

This intent of the goals and objectives requires that the city retain the physical demarcation of the boundary of the Halifax Common as per the 1763 land grant (Robie, South, South Park, Ahern, North Park, Cunard) as in the future an objective of the Halifax Common Plan is to return land to the Halifax Common regardless of its present use. FHC respectfully requests that HRM outline the Halifax Common boundary correctly in all future reference maps or documentation.

## 2. Special Zone Designation

FHC request that there be a unique zoning designation for all property within and bordering the Halifax Common. This is Canada’s oldest Common and designated an Historic Site under the city charter in 1971. Such a special zoning designation would underscore that this 1763 land grant is “for the use of the inhabitants of the town of Halifax as Common forever”. As the east side of the Halifax Common is the border between HRM by Design and Centre Plan territory this zoning would help consolidate and ensure consistent treatment of the entire Halifax Common. The intention that the city control and influence development on all Halifax Common land is illustrated throughout the 1994 Halifax Common Plan.

Supportive Excerpt from the Halifax Common Plan:

**Strengthen the Halifax Common as a place of special character, history and beauty. p5**

Objective number 2 (of 4 total) The preamble begins....."The Halifax Common, including both built areas and open space is a special district. The 235 acres has a distinct character which can be recognized and remembered. It provides us with a sense of place. People can recognize where they are and form a mental image of the area."

**Public and Private Buildings (p10)**

2.12 Continued and further beautification and landscaping of public and private buildings and their grounds should be encouraged. *All land and buildings should be made attractive to people at ground level, building on special characteristics of the district.* (This latter point directly contravenes what the city has recently allowed developers to do along South Park Street by excusing them from meeting the landscaped open space (Iso) requirements.)

### 3. Views from and of the Halifax Common

As committed to in the 1994 Halifax Common Plan, FHC requests that there be more and better protection for retention of views from and toward the Halifax Common in the direction of and from the Citadel, Rainnie Drive, North Park, Robie, South Street and South Park Street and that these regulations offer better protection for retention of these views in the future. This will require plans for clear enforcement of height restrictions of buildings within the Halifax Common and along the perimeter of the Halifax Common. This should include extra roof features such as "porches" for rooftop access, decks, railings, ventilation units, elevator shafts etc. and (especially no more doubling heights as with the CBC/Y).

As there was no notion of high-rises being built at the time of the 1994 plan there is no mention that this wouldn't be a good idea ie. the existing height restrictions would have kept it out of anyone understanding of future developments. Therefore the Halifax Common Plan is more narrowly focussed with respect to views than it would be today.

For example it emphasizes that the intent of the Common Plan was to improve the Victoria Park itself, the view of it and the view from South Street up South Park to the Citadel-that is the context or surrounding area and its "distinct character".

Supportive Excerpts from the Halifax Common Plan:

**Views and Landmarks (p6)** "Enjoyment of views is an important part of the Halifax Common experience. ....**Important views should be identified and steps taken to protect and enhance these views where possible. One example is the view looking north along South Park Street from South Street. South Park Street is wide and well treed and because it slopes down the entire length of the street and the Citadel can be seen.** However, the Victoria General hospital parking lot detracts from the view and a park or other appropriate use in place of the parking lot would **open up and enhance this view.**"

**Visual connections and scenic views should be emphasized to enhance attractiveness.**

**Views and Landmarks Related policy (p9)**

**2.7 In preparing detailed designs for specific areas important views should be further identified and steps taken to enhance these views where possible.**

### 4. Stop rule-breaking development on & around the Halifax Common

In 2016, the entire Halifax Common and its perimeter is under threat of being occupied by private highrises that obstruct the view and negatively effect on the experience of citizens on the Common. Enforcing and retaining existing height limits is an imperative. The following are examples of inappropriate development that should not be approved because they break existing regulations, ignore the Halifax Common Plan and will have a negative effect on the commoners' experience of the Halifax Common:

**Three high rises at Carlton Street, Spring Garden Road, Robie St Area:** Plans in the works for 3 high-rises between 18-30 storeys in the Spring Garden Road area between Robie and Carlton Streets by Dexel Construction and Killam Properties are all located on Halifax Common Land where the historic streetscape has a 2.5 storey height limit. Under the 1994 Halifax Common Plan the City of Halifax committed to protect the integrity of the Halifax Common and

to maintain and enhance the special character and beauty of the area, its open space, trees, views and landmarks, historic significance etc. If approved the towers will result in 8 -10 mixed-use, small-scale commercial and residential buildings on Spring Garden Road being demolished. Such developments should not be permitted on the Halifax Common land.

**Three high rises in the Willow Tree Area:** At [Robie and Quinpool developers](#) want to break existing regulations and dominate the western edge of the Halifax Common with out of scale high-rises - Armco (29-storeys), Westwood (24-storeys) and Dixel (12-storeys). If approved, these high-rises, like those already approved on South Park Street, will demolish historic buildings and negatively affect residential and rental units. The out-of-scale towers will destroy the charm, character, enjoyment and walkability of existing neighbourhoods and the Halifax Common by creating shadow and wind and by blocking public views. By breaking rules to locate high-rises next to public open space, developers will make huge profits from renting or selling premium priced luxurious views of the public's green space, -privatizing the public's view. These developments should not be permitted.

## 5. Greenscape, historic character, streetscapes, landscaped open space and climate change

The 1994 Halifax Common Plan makes frequent mention of the historic character of the houses and places of historic importance. These neighbourhoods and streetscapes should be protected. Regulations in the Centre Plan should ensure the following:

- (1) Open landscape requirements and setbacks should be retained throughout the Halifax Common and along its perimeter. This not only ensures the retention of character, it is a disincentive to replacing existing buildings with larger developments. Landscaped open space has an important role in mitigating extreme weather associated with climate change. A recent Insurance Bureau of Canada Report describes future costs for Halifax and the province from climate change. Landscaped open space provides an important function as a permeable surface for absorption of precipitation associated with forecast increased extreme weather associated with climate change. See:

<http://www.ibc.ca/on/resources/media-centre/media-releases/new-study-estimates-future-costs-of-climate-change>

As an example, the crown of a large tree is a freestanding anti-flood reservoir, in some cases intercepting so much rainfall that more than 1,500 gallons a year evaporates instead of hitting the ground. Chop down the tree, and you increase the volume of storm water a city must manage — something that especially affects older cities with aging drainage systems. See details at Time Magazine: Why Are Cities Cutting Down Trees- <http://www.landscapeonline.com/research/article/9263>

If the extreme weather is in the form of snowstorms then landscaped open space is important for providing a location to place the snow removed from adjacent sidewalks and driveways. White Juan, Wet Juan and the type of weather experienced in recent winters are predicted to become the new normal. Creating more hard surface or hard

edges between buildings and sidewalks or roadways will exacerbate the problems of how we deal with these weather events.

- (2) Regulations preventing lot consolidation within the designated Halifax Common zone, including the perimeter should be created.
- (3) Disincentives for parking on Halifax Common lands should be created. Presently 25% of the land is used for surface parking. This should be transitioned to public open space. Existing parking lots should not be expanded as is the case of the parking lot next to the Pavilion on the Central Common. New parking lots should not be created as is the case on the Garrison Ground.

Supportive Excerpts from the Halifax Common Plan:

Special elements in the Halifax Common and opportunities for improvement and protection:

### **Open Green Space (p5)**

"The most notable feature is the open green space. The most prominent part is the series of city-owned "parks" which make up over 80 acres in a nearly continuous chain which follows the original Freshwater Brook." It names Victoria Park as one of these & Map 3 illustrates the series of parks.

"This series of parks is the traditional heart of the city park system and the most central visible and used park area in Halifax. It contributes significantly to the overall image of the city. The greenness or vegetative landscaping of these city-owned parks must be preserved and increased."

### **Green Space Related policy (p9)**

2.2 "Permanent and temporary parking lots should have proper landscaping screening and maintenance."

2.3 "Boulevards will be preserved and new ones established where appropriate. Emphasis will be placed on maintaining and enhancing boulevards with vegetative landscaping."

2.4 "The extension of a park from the existing Victoria Park to South Street via the Victoria General Hospital parking lot should be pursued. In the short term landscaping and maintenance should be enhanced on the existing parking lot. Alternative public uses may be considered."

### **Trees (p6)**

"The number and extensive variety of trees adds interest. Trees occur predominantly along streets and in boulevards delineating the streets and edges of open spaces.....large deciduous trees increase the feeling of openness. Trunks and leafy crowns add interest by filtering views. Large trees also serve to add a sense of time and permanence to the area, solidifying its place in the history of the city."

### **Trees Related policy (p9)**

2.5 Maintain and enhance the abundance and variety of trees on streets, boulevards, and in larger stands as an important living legacy.

### **Street Block Form and Sidewalks (p7)**

".....Wide sidewalks, which occur predominantly in the South Precinct around the Public Gardens and Victoria park, are another important element. One of the pleasures is strolling along the wide sidewalks, separated from traffic by a wide tree-lined grassed area between the

curb and sidewalk."

p9 refers to general policies meant to maintain and enhance the special character and beauty of the area.....

## 6. Mobility and Active Transportation Routes

A strong pedestrian system through a combination of sidewalks and paths should be emphasized. Safe pedestrian crossings of streets should be provided wherever paths cross streets. Benches should be available throughout the Common.

Supportive Excerpts from the Halifax Common Plan:

p11 Objective number 3 (of 4 total)

### **Circulation System**

**Provide an efficient and safe circulation system for vehicular, bicycle and pedestrian traffic.**

### **Pedestrian Linkage (p12)**

Convenient and safe pedestrian links are important. In the South Precinct there is the particular problem of long blocks where pedestrian connections are weak. The city should encourage pedestrian links through these long blocks as illustrated on Map 9. Pedestrian linkage within the city-owned land is covered in Section C- City-Owned Land and Public Open Space.

### **Policies (p19)**

**1.6 The design of Victoria Park should be enhanced.** Some things to be considered are:

- a. Improvement of trees and benches;
- b. Redesign and reconstruction of the sidewalks at the Spring Garden Road end; and
- c. Relocation or redesign of the bus shelter to improve the view of Victoria Park.

### **Pedestrian Linkage Related policy (p13)**

**3.8 The city should encourage a strengthening of pedestrian linkages, especially around public buildings in long blocks in the South Precinct where hospital, university and other buildings present barriers to pedestrians. Paths around and, in some cases, through buildings should be encouraged where appropriate as illustrated on Map 9. (note map 9 illustrates pedestrian links through the VG parking lot, Victoria Park and along South Park, South Street to Sackville.)**

## **B. City-Owned Land and Public Open Space**

### **Overall Goal (p16)**

**The city-owned land in the Halifax Common will be preserved largely as public open space for a variety of outdoor recreation and leisure activities or other suitable public uses.**

**under this goal are 8 Objectives and Policies**

### **1. Continuous Open Space and Pathway System (p17)**

**Objective: Strengthen the continuous open space and pathway system.**

...(p 18) **Victoria Park is a major pedestrian thoroughfare.** With an alley of trees between the Robbie Burns statue and fountain, **it is an attractive part of the open space system and should be further improved.** Some current problems are: Sidewalks at the Spring Garden Road end

need redesign and reconstruction: and **The view of Victoria Park from Spring Garden Road is partially obstructed by the bus shelter.**

## **7. Recapture the Former School for the Blind, present-day VG Parking lot.**

The recapture of the VG Hospital parking lot on the site of the former School for the Blind for a would complete the open space system from one end of the Halifax Common to the other. This has been discussed at various times in the past. Now that the VG hospital may be replaced strong representation should be made to the province for proper landscaping and return of the land to Halifax Common public open space. Capital Health obtained the Queen Elizabeth High School lands despite the recommendation that this land be returned to the Halifax Common in the 1994 Plan. The “Park within a Park” landscape design for the VG parking lot promised to the citizens in the mid 1980s has never been honoured. The block of Tower Road that was closed and now forms part of the VG hospital parking lot has never been landscaped as a pathway. This land should return to the Halifax Common. In the interim the city has retained a median along South Park St as part of the land swap with the province for QEHS. This should be appropriately landscaped to reflect that it is part of the Halifax Common, not a parking lot.

### **1.7 The city, in cooperation with the provincial government, should seek to continue the open space system through the Victoria General Hospital parking lot to South Street.**

The following possibilities should be examined.

- a. A park as an extension of Victoria Park
- b. Continuation of a playground
- c. Underground parking.
- d. A cultural centre, possibly combined with parking.

## **8. Work With Nature – reintroduce functioning wetland ecosystems**

HRM’s 2006 MOU agreeing on a daylighting policy specific to Dartmouth’s Sawmill River and the Halifax Common’s Freshwater Brook should be acted on. In face of extreme weather events associated with climate change there is a growing body of evidence that reintroducing functioning wetland ecosystems to deal with the challenges facing conventional stormwater management would save the city huge amounts of money as well as increase citizens’ passive enjoyment of the Halifax Common. See: <http://www.halifaxcommon.ca/tag/freshwater-brook/>

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Respectfully submitted,  
Peggy Cameron  
Co-chair Friends of Halifax Common