

REVIEW OF CURRENT PLANS FOR THE COGSWELL INTERCHANGE

To: Mayor Michael Savage, HRM Staff and Councillors

By: Ken Greenberg in cooperation with the Urban Development Institute

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PURPOSE:

The Halifax Regional Municipality (“HRM”) is seeking to transform this important entrance to the historic downtown core. The plan calls for the demolition of the existing Cogswell Interchange and the creation of a master planned redevelopment. Inherent in HRM’s decisions are how to pay for the required new infrastructure. In cooperation with the Urban Development Institute board I have been asked to review the current plan for this strategic location and provide a high level assessment of this initiative.

GENERAL PLAN – EKISTICS:

The current plan is described in the “Cogswell Transformed, Synthesis Report, March 24, 2014” prepared by Ekistics. The HRM preference seems to be **Option 2 - A fine grained extension of the historic city grid** described as follows: *“While creating a surprising amount of viable redevelopment, the block form and street layout proved to provide the best integration with surrounding neighbourhoods, grades, and overall transportation connections. This scheme served to be the most walkable, compact and intensive”*.

3 CONSIDERATIONS:

The redevelopment of the Cogswell Interchange area is an important initiative and a logical next step in connecting Halifax’s downtown to its surrounding neighbourhoods. It provides a chance to repair past damage and have a very positive effect in overcoming physical barriers between the downtown and its immediate neighbours, and in creating neighbourhood synergies.

While Option 2 would seem to be the best of the Options considered, we have some concerns that we would like you to address.

While there is a strong emphasis on functionality, it is ambitious, perhaps overly so in terms of density and absorption, and it does not provide the kind of bold, place-making vision that the site deserves. We have focused on three key interrelated considerations:

1. Place-Making: The importance of ‘place-making’ in contributing to such efforts, and directions to emulate, or avoid based on experiences in other cities.
2. Realistic Absorption vs Self Financing vs Place-Making: The appropriateness of density assumptions as they relate to place-making, absorption timing and sales, and to municipal expectations to have the project self-funding, or largely self-funding.
3. Unintended Consequences: The effect this additional density could have on other privately funded developments in the city. Will Cogswell’s good intentions have an unintended negative impact on some other developments in the city?

PLACE-MAKING:

The interlocking issues of place-making, density and use are highly related. Place-making for this site involves not just creating a collection of new buildings, but in shaping this neighbourhood to provide a people friendly destination, gateway to the waterfront, a unique draw for Halifax, and anchor to the downtown and nearby neighbourhoods. Think of Old Montreal or Yale Town in Vancouver related to large city place-making. Think of Crown Street in Glasgow Scotland, or the Oslo waterfront. Note that we admire these neighbourhood initiatives as place-making for their respective cities. Halifax is not a big city and thus any economic analysis for absorption should be made with the consideration of a smaller metropolitan area, with a slower growth economy.



It is not clear that as presently configured, the implementation of Option 2 would result in the creation of a new urban place, having characteristics that make it a truly memorable destination where locals and city visitors will make return visits.

Density and critical mass are needed but over the top density is not helpful, sometimes contributing to a prolonged period of construction ‘incompleteness’ and sterility, rather than a place that locals and city visitors like to frequent and rave about.

In many other places across North America, the idea of “leading with public realm” in major development projects has gained traction. From Toronto, Calgary, Vancouver, Boston, Denver St. Paul Minnesota, to Portland Oregon, major new development areas, or reclaimed or formerly obsolescent land, have been introduced with signature public spaces that add to the cities repertory and contribute to its appeal for residents, employees and visitors, as well as serving as a valuable economic development tool with a long range multiplier effect.

What is really needed is to create a highly successful piece of city fabric – a form of new ‘neighbourhood’ that contains the 21st century DNA Halifax is seeking, ideally a mix of uses with active public spaces and amenities in a walkable and appealing setting. A project of this scale and importance should be a poster child for the new, diverse, and animated Halifax, providing full life cycle housing with many tenure options, employment and retail, culture and recreation. It should be extroverted not introverted and well connected at its edges to downtown, the waterfront and the adjacent neighbourhoods.

Ask yourself if this option has a “cool-factor” that would excite young people to want to move to, or stay in Halifax, and live in this community?



Illustration of Option 2

REALISTIC ABSORPTION VS SELF-FINANCING VS PLACE-MAKING:

According to the attached Real Estate Absorption Study by Turner Drake and Partners Ltd. the Metro Halifax market is expected to experience low to moderate population growth in the next ten years. This is reflected in modest anticipated growth and absorption in the housing market with a total surplus demand of a little over 7,000 new residential units **for the entire Regional Municipality**, and correspondingly modest targets for office and retail space.

While the potential for absorption of multiple parcels to create that continuous fabric framing a signature public space, or spaces, has a lot to do with the strength and absorption potential of the City's different market segments – residential, condo and rental, office, retail, special uses, it is clear in the Turner Drake absorption studies that the development could/should only rely on residential to absorb density in any financially meaningful way.

How realistic is the projected 2,500,000 square feet in this location for the Halifax market? Can it be absorbed in a reasonable time frame? Ultimately the market will determine what can and cannot be absorbed, but if this plan is overambitious, much of the site may sit empty for a long time undermining the stated planning goals for this strategic project.

A balancing of goals and objectives is needed. It may not be possible or desirable to pay for removing the interchange, and build new roads and infrastructure from proceeds of the project's density. A longer view would suggest that the city will achieve greater financial benefits by focussing on place creation initially.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES:

While density is desirable in terms of adding to the critical mass of downtown population, there may be unintended consequences in overreaching, resulting in a very prolonged development process. 'Overdevelopment' in this project also has the potential to undermine desirable infill on other sites in and around downtown.

It is difficult to reconcile the ambitious absorption projections, as it relates to such supply not negatively effecting other areas of the downtown. The Ekistics report states:

- “The plan will create 2,500,000 square feet of new construction with 573,275 feet of potential commercial and 1,975,080 square feet of residential on newly created lots. Ground floor retail would amount to 55,000 square feet. Cogswell can act as a potential catalyst for future development of a further 6 acres of underdeveloped property on lands immediately surrounding the Interchange.
- 1,644 to 2,000 residential units with up to 2,500 residents
- Residential development on Cogswell is “people supply” for the existing downtown.

Much of the critical historical analysis about the Cogswell Interchange centered around how it unwittingly divided the downtown core from everything north of Cogswell, creating a physical and psychological barrier to downtown Halifax.

It is the interpretation of UDI that the 'licence' the city has been given in exploring the demolition and redeveloping the Cogswell Interchange relates to correcting a past mistake, and should sensibly consider the effect that a development of this magnitude will have on other developments in the city. We do not see any evidence that suggests that HRM has studied the effect that a public initiative like this will have on other developments in the city. UDI requests that the City undertake a study that addresses these concerns.

CONCLUSION:

Halifax has a number of special public spaces of different scales and character which define its unique sense of place from Point Pleasant Park to the Citadel, the Public Garden and the emerging Harbour Boardwalk. This development area should add to those places and contribute something special and different, carving out a memorable people place anchoring this end of the downtown and the Harbour Boardwalk. Building on the initiatives underway along the entire length of the waterfront, there is opportunity here to boldly break through the barriers that inhibit access to the water's edge in a convincing and seamless way. The current gesture in this direction unfortunately seems tentative and half-hearted.

Most disconcerting in the images presented with the current plan is the complete web of overhead pedways or "skyways" linking all of the proposed buildings. Much experience suggests that a small city like Halifax with a limited population, such a bifurcation of very expensive pedestrian flows would seriously undermine the commitment to activity and life at street level. The real effort should be placed on attractively designed 'pedestrian-friendly 'complete streets' adapted to the climate and supported by targeted street-level retail which also frames the public space(s) described above. While a great deal of attention has been devoted to resolving vehicular traffic flows with some innovations like the roundabouts, pedestrian flows would seem to have been given much less attention and resolution than it deserves.

The greatest long term value of this development should be in the stimulus effect it provides to the downtown and the city, not the immediate return in making this project self-financing from density sales. A less aggressive more realistic and quickly realized mid-rise "squash and spread" scheme should actually be more effective in realizing public objectives for place-making leading to increased visitation, job creation, business development, and property and business taxes. Bigger is not always better and it would insure that the area is built out sooner and is not a 20 year plus construction site.

What the Cogswell Interchange Renewal project really needs to do is set a great example. There is a once only opportunity to get it right and in doing so raise the bar on city building and public expectations of quality in Halifax. Quality and successfully tapping the combined resources of the public and private sectors is more important than sheer quantity. Cities across the continent have undertaken special projects that demonstrate their capacity to do high quality city building and engage the full range of their ambitions in linking social, economic and environmental goals.

Halifax benefits immensely from costs it incurred over 100 years ago to build The Public Gardens, The Common, Town Square and other iconic places in the city. It has a once in a lifetime opportunity to make the Cogswell Interchange a destination where people will want to live and visit.

Please let me know how I might provide further insight into the success and failure of municipal development experiments like the Cogswell Interchange initiative, in cities around the world, and how I might be of any assistance as it relates to this ambitious and important initiative.