

AN INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF THE CENTRE PLAN: KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

BY JENNIFER KEESMAAT

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This handout is part of a third-party independent review of the Centre Plan by Ms. Jennifer Keesmaat. For a complete report, including methodology and detailed review of the Package A documents, please visit <http://udins.ca/issues/> or contact udi@udins.ca.

CORRELATION OF PLAN'S VISION AND POLICIES

Whereas the vision articulates 'Complete Communities' as the foundation of the urban structure, there is no analysis to demonstrate how this will be achieved. How will HRM provide an integrated approach to service delivery to provide amenities to local communities? For example, local libraries, recreation centres and health services are a critical overlay to ensuring complete communities.

- **Recommendation One:** Expand and extrapolate the vision throughout the document to connect policy recommendations to larger planning themes.
- **Recommendation Two:** Identify collaborations required with other levels of government to ensure an alignment of strategies to deliver complete communities. Require Infrastructure Plans within HRM divisions to align with anticipated redevelopment areas. Incentivize development in areas that have infrastructure capacity.
- **Recommendation Three:** Re-evaluate the level of detail throughout the framework to ensure alignment between policy requirements and existing conditions. Ensure sites are not unintentionally downzoned.
- **Recommendation Four:** In partnership with industry and design professionals, develop site specific case studies to test the framework and build confidence in its applicability.

MUNICIPAL RESPONSIBILITIES AND OBLIGATIONS

City building is a shared activity that makes demands of the private sector to ensure the public interest is maintained and enhanced as the city evolves. The overall Plan places great emphasis on the obligations of private development to deliver on the vision and principles outlined. The document is silent, mostly, on the responsibilities of the public sector to both facilitate and deliver on investments in both the public realm and with respect to transit and transportation infrastructure.

- **Recommendation Five:** Identify municipal obligations and a process for developing required Infrastructure Plans that will ensure new growth can be accommodated without undue burden.
- **Recommendation Six:** Be bold on committing to delivering higher quality of living in Halifax. While demanding high standards from the private sector through obligatory words such as 'shall' and 'should', hold the Municipality to the same high standards. When committing to goals such as affordable housing on Municipal-owned properties and providing safe walkable streets, consider replacing the voluntarily language of 'may' with 'shall' and 'should'.
- **Recommendation Seven:** Ensure Municipal responsibilities are discharged across multiple departments, and that all departments must have accountability in the corporate reporting structure for delivering on their responsibilities.

HEIGHT AND DENSITY

It is unclear as to what the basis of the rationale is for the heights and densities proposed in the built form framework.

- **Recommendation Eight:** Identify an appropriate rationale and framework for height and density. Ensure Plan does not unnecessarily downzone sites.

NEIGHBOURHOOD LEVEL ANALYSIS

By applying a detailed policy framework broadly, unintended outcomes will result. The Plan provides prescriptive measures in areas that may not be necessary, and lacks recognition of specific character areas.

- **Recommendation Nine:** Conduct neighbourhood-specific analysis and create appropriate policies, by-laws and design guidelines that would support and enhance the unique character of each neighbourhood.

LEVEL THE PLAYING FIELD

The Design Manual introduces a higher expectation with respect to material quality, attention to detail, and contribution to the public realm than existed previously. At the same time, there is a risk that infill projects might become too difficult to pursue in relation to the opportunities elsewhere in the city.

- **Recommendation Ten:** Level the playing field between suburban and urban development by providing more resources to Regional Centre projects. Also, place similar design and development requirements on suburban development.

PLANNING FOR PARKS, OPEN SPACES AND THE ECOLOGY OF THE CITY

A key building block for walkable cities is the open space vision and parks plan. The Plan should speak to the role that HRM will play in redesigning the public realm to deliver on Complete Communities and Pedestrians First using municipal infrastructure design.

- **Recommendation Eleven:** Prepare and embed a detailed parks, open space and city ecology plan into Centre Plan's policies, by-laws and design guidelines.

RECOGNIZING NEIGHBOURHOOD NEEDS

Creating Complete Communities requires a commitment from the private sector, the Municipality and the Province.

- **Recommendation Twelve:** The plan requires an additional **Character Area Plan** (which could be included in Vision and Principles) that identifies the various neighbourhoods, the walksheds for them, and outlines a strategy for ensuring that local health facilities, daycares, recreation centers and educational facilities will be provided within a walkable neighbourhood.

CULTURE AND HERITAGE

A much stronger policy statement is required that recognizes the culture and heritage and history of HRM, while at the same time acknowledging that it is the objective of HRM to ensure that as change takes places, the cultural and built heritage will be better enhanced, protected and advanced.

- **Recommendation Thirteen:** Narrative should be added at the outset of this section that both illuminates and acknowledges the First Nations, African Nova Scotian and Acadian stories of the HRM. Plan should also be used as a tool to affirm the importance of better investing in, and preserving, heritage resources. In addition, a clear role should be articulated for the municipality in facilitating heritage preservation as the Regional Centre enters a high growth period.
- **Recommendation Fourteen:** Develop a strategy to expedite the creation of Heritage Conservation Districts.
- **Recommendation Fifteen:** Halifax is a city of heritage, one of Canada's and North America's oldest cities – the need for a larger and enhanced heritage planning department, supported by new hiring and massive incentives for property owners to reinvest, is required.

HOUSING

The Plan indicates that the municipality 'may' provide incentives to encourage infill housing through the Land Use Bylaw. Also, the Plan indicates that the municipality 'may' consider the use of surplus lands for affordable housing.

- **Recommendation Sixteen:** A more progressive approach that will truly yield outcomes would be to develop a 'housing first' policy whereby all surplus lands are first considered for affordable housing prior to disposition by the municipality. In addition, a strategy should be developed to proactively identify key sites and areas of the city where strategic land holdings could be acquired by the municipality for partnerships with both private and public sector agencies, to develop affordable housing.

MOBILITY

The document is silent on the most important elements necessary to creating a safe city for pedestrians – controlling speeds, introducing bump outs and widening sidewalks, and redesigning of right-of-ways to prioritize those on foot.

- **Recommendation Seventeen:** Map the planning watershed for each community, the high street of those communities, and a hierarchy of streets within each Complete Community. Each of these areas should then have specific street typologies that reveal how the street will be used for pedestrian life. New street typologies that cater to pedestrian activity, such as shared streets and woonerfs, should be introduced into community design and linked to areas where higher density development is anticipated.
- **Recommendation Eighteen:** Identify the strategy for expediting the creation of cycling facilities throughout the Regional Centre.

PUBLIC ART

Given that public art is a part of a long list of other public benefits that account for only 25% of the public benefit value achieved through bonusing, it may or may not materialize.

- **Recommendation Nineteen:** A better system would be to require 1% of capital construction costs to be allocated to public art on all projects over a certain scale, as a means to beginning to investing in, and developing, a substantial public gallery of art.

BALANCING CERTAINTY AND FLEXIBILITY

On the one hand, the city and residents would like certainty, and the proposed framework seeks to eliminate the discretionary nature of current approvals. On the other hand, in an infill context, every site is subject to contextual factors that are limiting and unique. Balancing this certainty in the process while providing flexibility is an essential task of the Plan.

- **Recommendation Twenty:** Reevaluate the approach to development review. Recognizing the complexity of infill development, create a highly trained specialized Regional Centre development review team dedicated to expediting approvals and creative problem solving.
- **Recommendation Twenty-One:** Default to the overarching intent of each chapter, not to the minutiae of the regulations.

PLANNING BEYOND THE 2031 HORIZON

The Plan currently assumes one growth scenario until 2031. How will the plan adapt to slow (or negative) growth, or faster-than-expected growth? What will happen to established neighbourhoods and the heritage assets beyond 2031?

- **Recommendation Twenty-Two:** Extend the planning timeframe beyond 2031 and consider different growth scenarios (high, medium and low). Consider a slow growth, or worse, decline scenario and ensure the Plan can respond to such scenarios.

ACHIEVING PLAN'S GROWTH TARGETS

The development of 18,000 units would be a 70% build out of the areas covered by the Plan. As such, an assumption herein is that over the next 13 years 70% of the frontages of the streets in the Plan that have been given higher designations would be built out. That is a ratio of 3:2 in which out of every 3 properties zoned for development, 2 is assumed to be developed by 2031. This assumption included large sites like Halifax Shopping Centre, West End Mall, and the Canada Post Lands, among others. As a basis for the inventory analysis for the Plan, this is problematic.

- **Recommendation Twenty-Three:** Consider a more realistic ratio of 10:1 or even 20:1, meaning, a land inventory of 10 or 20 sites approved with zoning criteria would be required to meet the development targets above.

CLOSING THE GAP BETWEEN HRM'S EXISTING PLANS

The focus of the Regional Centre Plan with respect to **Pedestrians First** in policy pertains primarily to 'human scaled' building design. It is unclear how the transit corridors and the Integrated Mobility Plan have informed the Urban Structure, and the extent to which the promotion of transit-oriented development has been a key driver in the Growth Nodes.

- **Recommendation Twenty-Four:** A strong cross-referencing is required, particularly since the Integrated Mobility Plan identifies as a key pillar the integration of land use planning with transit planning. Also, direct references to the Complete Streets policies in the Integrated Mobility Plan is essential.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The Plan does not articulate what the economic development strategy for the Regional Centre is, and the role that this planning framework will play in advancing it.

- **Recommendation Twenty-Five:** Develop a comprehensive, data driven analysis of economic development opportunities. Collaborate with key partners to facilitate and incentivize growth.

DEVIL'S IN THE DETAILS

This review is a high level analysis of the Centre Plan documents. There needs to be much more elaboration on the details of every policy, by-law and design guidelines. As an example, through industry consultations, it was identified that even modest GFARs provided are not achievable on many of the sites due to height, setback, stepback and other design requirements.

- **Recommendation Twenty-Six:** Work closely with the industry, designers, planners, economists, and other professionals to model and test the guidelines for unintended outcomes, and modify as needed.

ENVIRONMENT

While increasing the tree canopy coverage is identified as an objective in this section, there are no policies that demonstrate how the tree canopy will be safeguarded and expanded. The Urban Forest Master Plan provides the necessary tools to address such issues.

- **Recommendation Twenty-Seven:** Consistent with the Urban Forest Master Plan, policies should be added pertaining to run-off and the importance of creating porous surfaces as a part of all new developments. Incentives, in the form of fee reductions, should be provided for developments that limit non-porous surfaces.
- **Recommendation Twenty-Eight:** Consistent with the Urban Forest Master Plan, develop recommendations related to protecting and enhancing the tree canopy.