

Is HRM's Affordable Housing Work Plan Actually Working?

Before exploring this question, let me share some experiences from my world of work over the last 18 months:

1. Having adopted an Age Friendly Community Plan and been part of the South Shore Housing Action Coalition housing study, the Municipality of the District of Chester was well informed about the issues associated with loss of older adults in New Ross due to a lack of housing options. Their decision to waive all permit fees and purchase land for a non-profit seniors housing group in New Ross was a simple one and made quickly.
2. Expansion Dieppe, which is the economic development agency for the City of Dieppe, has adopted a mixed-income housing strategy as the foundation for its downtown business plan. The mix (75% market, 20% affordable, 5% non-profit) is tied to an underground parking incentive and matched to a 7-year payback in property taxes.
3. With a population less than one-third that of HRM, the City of St. John's owns and operates 476 affordable housing units. With 6 staff, the Non-Profit Housing Division of the Community Services Department manages the housing portfolio, leads the implementation of the City's 10-year affordable housing strategy, regularly engages its private and non-profit housing providers, keeps its non-market housing inventory up to date, facilitates partnerships between the private, non-profit and public sectors, and pursues affordable housing investment opportunities to help address some of the City's most pressing housing needs.

In May of this year, I conducted a survey of Dartmouth residents (N=311) and only 7% felt HRM was doing a good job on affordable housing... 63% felt HRM's efforts need to be improved.

The Province of New Brunswick has undertaken a review of affordable housing best practices in Canada, and from our region, only Charlottetown and St. John's made the list. A couple of the top findings are:

- 1) Local housing ecosystems need to be understood.
- 2) Regional involvement and strong local leadership are needed.

In this context, HRM lacks knowledge about its local housing ecosystems and lacks an appropriate framework to address local housing needs.

HRM does not understand its local housing ecosystems



Non-profit housing providers are key players in addressing the housing needs of our most vulnerable, but HRM has no game plan for engaging our non-market housing sector.

On the Dartmouth side of the harbour, there are an estimated 16 non-profit housing providers. Here's what we don't know:

- Who they serve and what housing needs they have
- How many units they own or manage
- Whether they have any available land
- How they collaborate within the housing sector and with the wider community, and
- The types of housing supports they offer and the challenges they face in delivering those services.

Here are my observations about affordable housing and Halifax Regional Municipality:

- HRM started its research into its affordable housing needs in 2004 and after a very lengthy period of time adopted the Affordable Housing Work Plan in 2018.
- The Work Plan is not a strategy or a business plan, in other words, it does not spell out what should be done, when, and by whom. No monitoring or reporting protocols are included.
- Reports listed in the 2018 Work Plan have not been completed.
- HRM does not track its housing needs.
- The waiving of all permit fees for non-profit housing providers, approved by Regional Council in April 2019, has not been implemented.
- HRM is apparently unable to deal with costly Halifax Water connection fees which are detrimental to the construction of new non-profit housing units.
- It seems the Planning and Development Department is responsible for managing affordable housing for HRM, but there is only one person assigned to this function.

In short, HRM's Affordable Housing Work Plan isn't working and the main reasons are a lack of commitment and the need for a more effective organizational framework that responds to communities.

The Housing and Homelessness Partnership (a grouping of governments and agencies like the United Way) oversees the Work Plan and needs support from HRM's community council system.

Section 25 of the HRM Charter suggests that community councils are under-utilized and that they can play a range of roles in addressing community needs. In my survey of Dartmouth residents, 44% want the Harbour East Marine Drive Community Council to oversee affordable housing and another 30% would support that role if that was cost-effective to do so.

The advantages of using the community council system to address affordable housing are (1) regular involvement of HRM councillors in addressing housing needs in their communities (2) involving planning staff more directly in the challenges of building affordable housing (3)

engaging the public as per the Section 25 of the HRM Charter (4) helping to build community capacity, and (5) developing better knowledge of local housing ecosystems.

A community-based affordable housing response shouldn't be too hard to set up and can be accomplished without impacting HRM's operating budget. Many in the housing industry are increasingly concerned with the planning department's over emphasis on regulating the design of buildings. Less emphasis on that function would free up staff resources that would be more appropriately committed to affordable housing.

The chart below shows some suggested functions of a community-based affordable housing model for HRM. Consider the populations bases and contrast them to the work being done by the City of St. John's, which has a population of 114,000 people.

Halifax and West Community Council	North West Community Council	Harbour East Marine Drive Community Council
Population: 150,600	Population: 110,180	Population: 129,400
Planner #1	Planner #2	Planner #3
Information	Information	Information
Promote partnerships	Promote partnerships	Promote partnerships
Identify local solutions	Identify local solutions	Identify local solutions
System navigation	System navigation	System navigation
Annual Report	Annual Report	Annual Report
Annual Meeting	Annual Meeting	Annual Meeting

Like the actual building of a house, HRM's response to affordable housing needs to be built from the ground up.

There is nothing stopping HRM from addressing the affordable housing needs of its citizens and communities, except for a lack of commitment to do so.

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