

HALIFAX

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Item No. 14.1.6
Halifax Regional Council
April 25, 2017

TO: Mayor Savage and Members of Halifax Regional Council

SUBMITTED BY: Original Signed by 

Jacques Dubé, Chief Administrative Officer

DATE: April 11, 2017

SUBJECT: **Community Grants Program: Trails Funding**

SUPPLEMENTARY REPORT

ORIGIN

May 10, 2016 – Regional Council approval of a Grant Committee recommendation directing “staff to submit a Supplementary Report with recommendations in regard to recreational trails, including motorized, that are not part of the HRM Active Transportation network or municipal parks programming.”

LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

Halifax Regional Municipality Charter (“HRM Charter”) (2008) clauses 79(1)(ah)(av)

The Council may expend money required by the Municipality for

(ah) playgrounds, trails, including trails developed, operated or maintained pursuant to an agreement made under clause 73(c), bicycle paths, swimming pools, ice arenas and other recreational facilities;”

(av) a grant or contribution to:

(v) any charitable, nursing, athletic, educational, environmental, cultural, community, fraternal, recreational, religious or social organization within the Province;

(vi) a registered Canadian charitable organization.

HRM Charter, subsection 73(3) “The Municipality may enter into and carry out agreements...(c) with the Government of the Province with respect to the development, operation or maintenance of trails on land of Her Majesty in right of the Province.”

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that Halifax Regional Council continue to provide eligibility for funding, through the *Community Grants Program*, to recreation trails that are located on property owned and operated by non-profit and charitable organizations until such time as:

- (1) Council receives a staff report and recommendation respecting the possible adoption of a policy to regularize participation and funding consideration for HRM partnered trail associations; and

- (2) Council provides direction to the Chief Administrative Officer in respect of that report and recommendation.

BACKGROUND

Halifax Regional Municipality's role in trails development originated with the Halifax Regional Development Agency (the "HRDA") in relation to rural economic development. Because trails development had been championed by an arms-length service agency (HRDA), there was no designated trails funding program or allocation within the Municipality's annual budget. By default, grant requests were directed to the *Community Grants Program*, a centralized funding program under which former municipal grants were consolidated following amalgamation in 1996. In its formative years, the program established funding categories and instituted two types of grants (project or capital) each with a maximum funding threshold. The intent was to align grants with the Municipality's service mandate following the Provincial/Municipal Service Exchange Agreement and re-assign recurring operating grants to applicable service departments. Within this context, the *Community Grants Program* provided modest grants to trail-related projects primarily for administrative costs such as insurance and marketing. See: Table 1 in **Attachment 1** of this report. It is important to note that grant recipients were not exclusively trail groups and included rural economic/community development, sport/recreation, and a service club that operated a park.

From 1999 to 2004, trail groups who received funding under the *Community Grants Program* were primarily developing amenities in rural locations as established under the HRDA's mandate. In general, these rural recreational trails were wilderness/back country amenities, as well as some that permitted ATVs. These were built as part of community economic development plans to attract trail visitors who would purchase local goods and services such as gasoline, food and lodgings, and perhaps visit other attractions on route or in the immediate area, for example community events, museums or craft studios. During this same period, trails development transitioned to HRM's Real Property Planning department. The HRDA subsequently merged with the Greater Halifax Partnership and Destination Halifax.

In 2004, HRM created a designated budget for trails construction and maintenance and the *Community Grants Program* discontinued designated funding for trails. Aside from budget capacity, the consolidation and centralization of trails funding was considered preferable given the complexity of coordinating multiple property owners, government regulations and funding opportunities, and rapid growth in the number of non-profit participants.

In 2006, Regional Council approved the Active Transportation Functional Plan. This plan described how the municipality would achieve the walking and bicycling objectives of the Municipal Planning Strategy. The Plan positioned trails development as a means to promote connectivity and non-motorized travel between amenities, within a neighborhood, or between geographic communities. In light of this new plan and of the designated budget allocation for trails construction and maintenance, a coordinating committee comprising representation from funded trail groups and HRM staff was formed to plan and coordinate the development of a Regional Trails System in accordance with this Plan. In 2007, this committee was incorporated as the Halifax Regional Trails Association (HRTA). The 2006 AT Functional Plan was also a rationale for Council to create the Active Transportation Advisory Committee, on which HRTA is represented. Although not explicitly excluded by policy or a motion of Regional Council, trails groups developing amenities outside the scope of the Active Transportation Functional Plan were typically not funded or received partial funding towards maintenance.

HRM supports HRTA member projects via two funding streams. These are: 1) projects to expand or recapitalize the active transportation greenway network (as specified in the AT Priorities Plan) in the municipality. The annual budget for this varies each year, but has ranged from about \$800,000 to over a million dollars in recent years. Some of these projects are implemented by the community groups and some are implemented directly by HRM; and, 2) maintenance funding which totals \$180,000 annually.

In 2014, Council endorsed the Active Transportation Priorities Plan. This Plan formalized the creation of a

Regional Active Transportation Greenway Vision where the term “Greenway” was introduced as the term or “brand” for those trails which conform to a multi-use pedestrian and bicycle standard (at least 3 meters wide) and that aims to connect communities and key origins and destinations, primarily for transportation purposes. The Plan specifies the location of regional greenways and recommends directing AT capital funding to the development of this Greenway vision. Following the approval of the Active Transportation Priorities Plan, facilities that are not part of this envisioned regional greenway network (e.g. hiking trails) are not prioritized for funding under the Halifax Regional Trails Association’s arrangement with HRM. As part of implementing this Plan, management of the Regional Trails Program was re-assigned to HRM Transportation and Public Works. An Active Transportation Advisory Committee that includes representation from HRTA continues to operate and reports to the Transportation Standing Committee.

In summary, the shift in priorities from rural economic development to “active transportation/connectivity” has resulted in HRM no longer contributing to the development and expansion of HRTA member recreational walking trails. Furthermore, there is no clear mandate regarding the Municipality’s role in funding facilities for motorized trail uses (e.g. ATVs, snowmobiles, motorized bikes) Consequently, some of these groups have sought alternate or additional municipal funding opportunities under the *Community Grants Program*.

DISCUSSION

Following Council’s approval of the Grants Committee’s recommendation to review the role of the *Community Grants Program* in relation to trails, a presentation on the proposed *Blue Route* provincial cycling network was made to the Active Transportation Advisory Committee (Advisory Committee) at their meeting of May 19, 2016. Partially in response to this presentation and partially related to other issues that had been raised related to the respective roles of HRM and HRTA member groups in greenway development and co-branding, the Advisory Committee recommended that the Transportation Standing Committee request a staff report on the advisability of developing policy regarding municipal funding in relation to trails and potential co-branding opportunities. Presumably, the aim is to clarify roles and responsibilities, eligibility and the relative priority among national (Trans Canada Trail) and provincial initiatives (Blue Route) in relation to the Regional Trails System, and among trail initiatives within the region. The Standing Committee referred the matter to staff (Transportation & Public Works) for a report.

The Transportation Advisory Committee’s request for a staff report on policy development pre-empts the need to reaffirm or revise *Community Grants Program* funding criteria at this time. Should a policy for trails funding be developed it is expected to clarify issues of eligibility and prevent overlap or duplication in municipal funding.

In the interim, the *Community Grants Program* will continue as a means to support trails constructed on property owned and operated by a non-profit organization or charity in accordance with the program’s primary focus on local volunteer initiatives. Capital leasehold improvements to government (including municipal) or private property are ineligible for consideration. Notwithstanding this restriction, funding has been provided for non-fixed assets such as a snowmobile for trail grooming, composting toilets, small equipment, signage and interpretation.

To date, trail-related grant applications to the *Community Grants Program* have been received primarily under the Recreation & Leisure funding category. This category is chronically over-subscribed and may warrant further clarification and focus in relation to HRM’s priority outcomes.

Despite historical trails funding requests and awards, the *Community Grants Program* could serve a niche role in support of, for example, the construction of loop trails in a park, campground, burial ground, or on conservation land owned by a non-profit, or within large-scale non-profit affordable or supportive housing developments. Project grants could also support archaeological, historical or ecological research and interpretation. The scope of potential participation suggests that non-profit sectors other than sport or recreation groups could be included such as ethno-cultural, religious, historical, conservation trusts, or housing.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

None.

RISK CONSIDERATION

Low. This report recommends no change at this time to the *Community Grants Program* eligibility criteria, funding categories, or priorities pending Regional Council's decision in regard to the development of policy to guide trails funding and roles and responsibilities for HRTA member groups in support of Active Transportation Priorities Plan objectives.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The Grants Committee comprises four (4) members of Council appointed by their respective Community Councils, one of whom is a member of the Audit & Finance Standing Committee who shall serve as Chair, and six (6) members of the general public.

The Active Transportation Advisory Committee comprises four (4) members at large and representatives from the Halifax Regional Trails Association, Halifax Cycling Coalition, Province of Nova Scotia, Bicycle Nova Scotia, Ecology Action Centre, Advisory Committee on Accessibility in HRM, and municipal staff. The committee provides advice to Regional Council through the Transportation Standing Committee.

The Advisory Committee on Accessibility in HRM comprises two (2) members of Council and eight (8) members of the general public. The committee provides advice to Regional Council through the Transportation Standing Committee.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

None.

ALTERNATIVES

Regional Council could direct staff to change the eligibility requirements of the *Community Grants Program*.

This action is not recommended on the basis of the following:

- The development of a policy by Transportation & Public Works is anticipated to provide clarification in regard roles and responsibilities for HRM and HRTA group collaboration on active transportation facility development (e.g. trails), including the eligibility of motorized and/or mixed-use trails in HRM.

ATTACHMENTS

1. Synopsis of Regional Trails System Development and Municipal Funding.

A copy of this report can be obtained online at <http://www.halifax.ca/council/agendasc/cagenda.php> then choose the appropriate meeting date, or by contacting the Office of the Municipal Clerk at 902.490.4210, or Fax 902.490.4208.

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Synopsis of Regional Trails System Development and Municipal Funding.

Origins in Rural Economic Development (1998-2003): The Municipality's role in the development of trails originated with a service agreement between HRM and the former Halifax Regional Development Agency (HRDA). The Agency's intent was primarily rural economic development and the expectation that visitors using wilderness hiking paths would purchase goods and services within the area. Trails with coastal or lake access might also encourage canoeing, kayaking, boating, angling, and swimming. Several of these earlier projects focused on the conversion of abandoned railway lines and potential links to the Trans Canada Trail.

It was during this developmental period that the *Community Grants Program* received applications from non-profit organizations for funding. In 1999, program issued four (4) grants of \$10,000 towards the *Salt Marsh Trail*, *Musquodoboit Trailway*, *Blueberry Run Trail*, and *St. Margaret's Bay Trail*. The following year the program received an influx of applications from trail groups seeking funds towards recurring administrative costs. As an interim measure, an allocation for trails was divided equally among applicants resulting in modest awards averaging \$2,000.

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Value of Awards	\$40,000	\$25,000	\$22,000	\$20,000	\$23,205	\$27,500
# of Awards	4	5	12	11	13	13

Concerns were raised at the HRM Grant Committee that demand was increasing in relation to trails and could divert funding in a category that was over-subscribed¹. To address the program's budget capacity operating grants that were largely a pre-amalgamation legacy in relation to social service providers were discontinued and the program amended to project-specific grants with maximum funding thresholds. The issue of funding to trails development arose again in 2002 with a request to Regional Council from the Regional Trails Advisory Committee for an allocation of \$100,000 to encompass administration, insurance, cleaning and washroom supplies, and marketing. This funding was to be in addition to capital and maintenance funding provided under Parks & Recreation which at the time managed a \$300,000 budget for trails development.² The request was declined and the issue of sustainable funding for the Regional Trails System was referred to HRM Parks & Recreation. The department assumed responsibility for trails in advance of the Halifax Regional Development Agency's merger into the Greater Halifax Partnership and Destination Halifax³. A transfer of responsibility from an arms-length agency to a municipal service department facilitated a consolidation of funding under departmental coordination and designated trails funding ceased under the *Community Grants Program*.

Transition to Recreational Amenities: Under Parks & Recreation the scope of trail development continued to expand with the development of suburban and urban locations. An emphasis on physical "activity" was consistent with the Municipality's focus on facilities and programming that contributed to personal health and wellness. Although some trails continued as mixed-use trails and permitted motorized vehicles including snowmobiles, all-terrain vehicles and motorized bikes, tensions continue with respect to access to municipal funding.

¹ Minutes, Grants Committee, March 30, 2000.

² Recommendation Report to Regional Council from HRM Grants Committee, "Community Grants Program: Regional trails Advisory Committee Request for Funding Increase 2003-2004", dated September 12, 2002.

³ Information Report to Regional Council, "Update on the HRDA and GHP Merger", dated September 7, 2006.

It is important to note that municipal funding for trails construction and maintenance increased from \$300,000 to approximately \$800,000 and that during this period the Halifax Regional Trails Advisory Team incorporated as a non-profit society⁴ and was recognized by Council as the principle partner in planning, developing and operating HRM's Regional Trail System. Council also approved the funding criteria and disbursement process for trails maintenance funds that restricted eligibility to members of the Halifax Regional Trails Advisory Team. The funding model was subsequently revised to include capital funding for construction. The restricted access to trails funding was endorsed by Council in 2014 but the disbursement of funds required Regional Council's approval (not peer review as previously adopted by HRTA)⁵. Council delegated decision-making authority to the Chief Administrative Officer including capital and maintenance funding agreements and expenditures in accordance with the annual budget approved by Council.

Focus on Active Transportation: In 2015, the management of the Regional Trails System was transferred from Parks & Recreation to Transportation & Public Works to reflect the Municipality's priority focus on active transportation. Within this framework, priority has been placed on facilities that are built to an Active Transportation Greenway standard (ie. at least 3 meters wide, with accessible slopes, paved or unpaved). This network is intended to encourage active modes of transportation between amenities, neighbourhoods, or geographic communities.

Other Trails: Parks & Recreation continues to have a role in trails but focused on municipal properties and adjunct recreational programming. For example, closed loops in public parks, walking clubs in HRM facilities located in the vicinity of a trail, bike safety instruction, events etc. Assistance is also available under the *Community Grants Program* for trails on property owned and operated by a non-profit organization.

⁴ The society incorporated in 2006 and changed its name to the Halifax Regional Trails Association in 2007.

⁵ Recommendation Report to regional Council, "Regional Trails Program – Funding and Related Agreements", dated January 23, 2014.