

Mayor Mike Savage Business Voice

Submission date: Dec. 16, 2019 for February issue

Background:

'Outlook' focus on Halifax's growth. We're doing things a bit differently this time, and we're going to focus on diversity and inclusion in Halifax and the different initiatives and groups who are making it happen.

Submission:

Our remarkable historic city is changing at a dizzying pace, with new buildings popping up throughout the region to accommodate a population that is growing at an unprecedented rate. With this has come new jobs, new investments in diverse sectors and increased opportunities for more people.

Sustainable, responsible growth is good, allowing the municipality to pay for high quality services for residents, everything from police and fire, to snow removal, recreation facilities and transit improvements. Property tax revenues help us create new parks, preserve irreplaceable tracts of wilderness, and meet the daunting challenges of climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Look at what's happening to our population: 2016 was a record year for population growth...until we topped it 2017 and again last year with 8,544 new residents. Fully 87 percent of our growth, excluding births, came from outside Nova Scotia and mostly from outside Canada. Added to that, a third of our population growth was in the 20-29 year-old group, a bellwether cohort for cities the world over.

But while economic growth is unquestionably providing expanded opportunities to more people, we cannot ignore that the benefits do not accrue equally. The adage that a rising tide lifts all boats is only partially true. Indeed, growth tends to widen the gap between those doing well, and those who struggle.

While we enjoy the benefits of growth, at the same time we should ask ourselves: Are we a city for children, the elderly, the disadvantaged and the disabled? Are we a city that truly embraces diversity and newcomers?

If we are to truly benefit from Halifax's momentum, from the continued growth the Conference Board of Canada predicts through 2023, now is the time to act to help more people share in our economic success.

In any city, the list of social challenges is long: accessibility, public safety, inclusion across diverse racial and cultural lines, and so on. Halifax is not immune to any of them, and indeed many are intertwined.

A housing needs assessment completed in 2015 found one in four Halifax households faced housing affordability challenges — meaning they spent more than 30% of their income on rent or mortgage costs. In the face of rising home values, climbing rents and low vacancy rates, I fear this housing crunch is worsening.

It heartens me that good work is already underway. In September, Regional Council approved the Centre Plan Package A, which identified areas for intensification of development. This will allow us to bring on the right kind of housing more quickly, in the right areas and help ease stubbornly low vacancy

rates. I have spoken with Municipal Affairs and Housing Minister Chuck Porter about these issues and I am encouraged by the potential for collaboration.

Alongside United Way Halifax CEO Sara Napier, I co-chaired a Poverty Solutions working group, guided by stakeholders and community members. The group delivered a comprehensive Building Poverty Solutions report containing 129 ideas for action. Some are clearly within our municipal wheelhouse and others require help from our government and community partners.

The municipality's Affordable Access Program took effect this year, offering residents in need deeply discounted or free access to municipal recreation programs and options to defer property tax. Low income transit passes, offered in partnership with the Department of Community Services, mean nearly 10,000 people are now eligible for free transit.

The Mobile Food Market – a wonderful collaboration of my office, city staff, the Ecology Action Centre, Nova Scotia Health Authority, MetroWorks and Loblaws – has expanded to bring fresh produce to 13 sites across six communities. We also found a new home for the Common Roots community farm and this past fall Hope Blooms broke ground on its new kitchen and community space on municipal land.

These tangible examples of human capacity and generosity show us what we can achieve together, between orders of government, across the private and public divide, and with the impassioned social sector.

I am proud of how far we have come, and I am excited about what this New Year holds. Our city is more optimistic and vibrant than most of us could have imagined a few years ago. Let's work together to ensure all citizens can be part of Halifax's success.