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**Item No.12.1.4**  
**Environment & Sustainability Standing Committee**  
**December 7, 2020**

**TO:** Chair and Members of the Environment and Sustainability Standing Committee

**SUBMITTED BY:**

*Original Signed*

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Kelly Denty, Director, Planning and Development

*Original Signed*

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Jacques Dubé, Chief Administrative Officer

**DATE:** November 5, 2020

**SUBJECT:** **Ecological Lens Decision-Making**

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**ORIGIN**

On September 18, 2018, the following motion of Halifax Regional Council was put and passed:

*“THAT Halifax Regional Council request a staff report be prepared and brought back to Regional Council for debate no later than spring 2019, detailing the proposed implementation of an “Ecological Lens” in the decision-making process of HRM. The purpose of the “Ecological Lens” is to create an environmental rubric for measuring the impact on the ecology and environment on HRM through the decisions that Regional Council and its various committees make. This “Ecological Lens” is intended to provide a tool to help Council weigh the pros and cons of their decisions from an environmental impact perspective, and is intended to be part of every staff report.”*

**LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY**

Halifax Regional Municipality Charter, Section 34, (3) The Council shall provide direction on the administration, plans, policies and programs of the Municipality to the Chief Administrative Officer.

**RECOMMENDATION**

It is recommended that the Environment and Sustainability Standing Committee recommend that Regional Council direct the Chief Administrative Officer to:

1. Update the Implementation Guidelines for the Environmental Implications Section of Regional Council and Committee Reports; and
2. Develop mandatory training to educate staff on the implementation guidelines and additional resources and requirements for environmental decision-making.

## **BACKGROUND**

As part of an effort to green the Municipality's corporate culture, the Municipality partnered with The Natural Step (TNS) in 2004 to conduct a Corporate Sustainability Analysis. TNS is a non-profit organization that works with organizations using a science-based framework to help transition towards a more sustainable society by making decisions with a sustainability lens. A corporate sustainability analysis was undertaken to identify gaps and opportunities towards the themes of healthy, sustainable, and vibrant communities. The analysis identified the need to link initiatives and provided high-level, corporate-wide recommendations. To link initiatives, the corporate sustainability analysis recommended an integrated systems approach to clean air, land, water and energy.

A Corporate Sustainability Filter Pilot Project was developed in 2008 as a decision-making tool to support the intent of the 2006 Regional Plan. The development of a sustainability filter was seen as a robust planning and management tool to help predict social and environmental impacts of major decisions before they are made and to integrate science-based principles of sustainability.

The sustainability filter provided several services for measuring the impact of decisions and evaluating options for decisions. The filter:

- provided an improved basis for the selection of projects and resources;
- included long term goals and objectives;
- assessed environmental, social and economic impacts; and
- was a support tool for making informed decisions at different levels within departments of an organization.

The pilot project focused on the areas of procurement, infrastructure and asset management, and community visioning. As part of this process, staff from the pilot groups were interviewed to design a customized filter and guide for team leaders that would meet their needs. This was followed by a workshop to enhance the sustainability filter. Finally, a report was prepared with recommendations on how to proceed after the pilot phase.

In 2011, the Sustainable Environment Management Office (SEMO), now the Energy & Environment program area, provided recommendations to the Environment and Sustainability Standing Committee (ESSC) on how to proceed with the sustainability filter. During the pilot phase, staff worked towards mainstreaming a sustainability filter into the decision-making process with assistance from TNS by developing the HRM Sustainability Planning Tool and a strategic questions "cheat sheet" for sustainable decision-making (See Attachments 1 and 2). After the initial pilot project, SEMO staff interviewed managers regarding the implementation of the sustainability filter in the decision-making process. The following results were reported:

- A flexible and encouraging approach needed to be taken.
- Sustainability was becoming mainstream and staff were taking ownership of this concept in their decision-making.
- The triple bottom line approach to sustainability was easier to adopt for all ranges of services rather than TNS, which slowed decision-making.
- A "one-size fits all" filter was too rigid to meet the needs of different types of decision makers.
- The report noted that "Building a totally comprehensive filter that meets all the needs of professions employed, is a virtually impossible task".

Staff recommended a flexible and adaptable approach to consider environmental sustainability and recommended that commentary on environmental implications be made a standard section for all Council recommendation reports. This approach would not require approval from other business units, rather, it would allow staff to include sustainability considerations in their recommendations and provide a simple, flexible, and effective approach. The TNS tool would continue to be available to assist staff but would not

be a required tool. This recommendation became the required Environmental Implications section in Council recommendation reports. This section complements the Risk and Financial Implications section in recommendation reports but does not include social considerations explicitly.

The recommendation for the Environmental Implications section allowed for flexibility, ensured sustainability had been considered, and was consistent with a blended approach that allows sustainability to be woven throughout all outcome areas, since the environment provides a basis for clear economic and social values as well.

The ESSC recommended the Administrative Standing Committee adopt the Environmental Implications section as a standard requirement in Council and Committee reports. The Environmental Implications Section was approved for adoption in February 2012.

## **DISCUSSION**

### Updated Implementation Guidelines

The Implementation Guidelines for the Environmental Implications Section of Regional Council and Committee Reports was developed and adopted in 2012 (Attachment 3). However, these guidelines have not been updated since that time and therefore should be revised. This section of staff reports is not always treated consistently across the organization. There is a need to re-engage staff and provide clarity on the intent, scope and resources associated with this report requirement. Staff will be encouraged to consider the environmental implications of projects at their very beginning and throughout their development, and ultimately to be captured clearly in any required reports to Council.

A mandatory educational webinar for staff should be developed to explain the guidelines and provide additional resources for staff working on projects that require a more comprehensive and holistic approach. This online training should be considered mandatory for all employees who require Council decisions in their work. The requirement to complete this webinar can also be added to the checklist for onboarding new employees.

### Triple Bottom Line Decision Making

Based on the discussion of this motion at Regional Council, it is recommended that staff further explore the use of triple bottom line decision making. Triple bottom line decision-making is evidence-based decision making that factors in environmental, social and economic considerations. One of the Municipality's core values is evidence-based decision making. This value could be further defined to include triple bottom line decision making.

The Triple Bottom Line accounting framework was originally developed to assess an organization's sustainability. However, it is not well-suited to be used for making complex decisions on municipal work because it is difficult to create meaningful environmental and social measures that can apply to the wide range of decisions that go before Council. The metrics for a triple bottom line framework would have to be very high-level to be applicable to all projects, adding little value or guidance to decision-makers. Therefore, staff do not recommend following a strict, formalized triple bottom line approach to decision-making at this time.

Rather, the interconnections between environmental, social and economic considerations should be considered during the decision-making process. Whenever possible, metrics for environmental and social impacts (both positive and negative) should be considered at the beginning of each project, on a project-by-project basis. HalifACT, the comprehensive climate change plan that was approved by Council in June 2020, encourages the mainstreaming of climate thinking across the organization. The suggested staff training, along with new requirements for climate action across business units, will improve the administration's ability to apply an ecological and climate-focused lens throughout all relevant projects, programs and policies.

HRM's Social Policy Administrative Order (AO) 2020-002-GOV was approved by Regional Council in May 2020. The overarching purpose of HRM's Social Policy is to provide a clearly defined, consistent, and collaborative approach to social policy. It is a framework intended to guide decisions, activities and outcomes that are compatible with the vision, strategic directions, and principles that are outlined in the AO. The Social Policy also establishes a governance structure to help with the coordination of existing and future work. As outlined in the Social Policy AO, an existing internal working group is leading this work. Work is currently underway to develop and implement resources for staff to build and enhance organizational capacity around social policy. Staff working on social policy and the Energy and Environment group will work together to find synergies in the social and environmental aspects of decision-making to provide materials to staff working on projects involving these types of decisions in order to apply both a social and environmental lens.

### **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no cost implications related to the recommendations in this report, as they can be implemented with existing staff resources.

### **RISK CONSIDERATION**

There are no significant risks associated with the recommendations in this report. The actions suggested will decrease risk by improving consideration of environmental and social impacts in decision-making.

### **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

There has not been specific community engagement on this report.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS**

As discussed in the report.

### **ALTERNATIVES**

The Environment and Sustainability Committee may recommend that Regional Council direct the CAO to:

1. Develop an alternative approach to considering the environmental implications of municipal work.
2. Not update the Environmental Implications Guidelines. This is not recommended as the implementation guidelines are out of date and would benefit from updating.

### **ATTACHMENTS**

1. HRM Sustainability Planning Tool
2. Strategic Questions Cheat Sheet for Sustainable Decision-Making
3. Implementation Guidelines: Environmental Section of Regional Council and Committee Reports

A copy of this report can be obtained online at [halifax.ca](http://halifax.ca) or by contacting the Office of the Municipal Clerk at 902.490.4210.

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HRM Sustainability Planning Tool



Project Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Project Department Lead: \_\_\_\_\_

Briefly describe the project/decision:

In the table below, please make comments regarding the extent which this initiative moves HRM closer to or farther away from its strategic priority of sustainability. Please use specific examples or metrics where appropriate.

Sustainability Goals and Metrics		Not Applicable	Positive, moves HRM toward sustainability goals	Negative, moves HRM away from sustainability goals
To encourage HRM to:				
General	 <b>Smart use of alternative fossil fuels and metals.</b>			
<i>specific</i>	...reducing use of fossil fuels			
<i>specific</i>	...encouraging use of alternative fuels and energy sources			
<i>specific</i>	...reducing use of scarce metals			
<i>specific</i>	...encouraging use of recycled, recyclable, reused, and reusable components and materials			
General	 <b>Smart use of synthetic chemicals and substances.</b>			
<i>specific</i>	...reducing product/chemical toxicity			
<i>specific</i>	...reducing negative impact on human health			
<i>specific</i>	...encouraging use of products made with natural components			
<i>specific</i>	...encouraging use of recycled, recyclable, reused, and reusable components and materials			
<i>specific</i>	...product/chemical is eco-label certified			

Sustainability Goals and Metrics		Not Applicable	Positive, moves HRM toward sustainability goals	Negative, moves HRM away from sustainability goals
To encourage HRM to:				
General 	<b>Smart land and eco-system management.</b>			
specific	... protection of natural habitat			
specific	... protection and enhancement of green-space			
specific	... improvement of land quality			
specific	... materials taken from well managed eco-systems			
specific	... encouraging use of recycled, recyclable, reused, and reusable components and materials			
specific	... wood taken from FSC certified forest			
General 	<b>Enhance the ability of people to meet their human needs.</b>			
specific	... creating a safe work environment			
specific	... enhancing inclusive and transparent decision-making			
specific	... improving human health			
specific	... activities encourage community engagement			
specific	... activities support diversity			
specific	... activities that enhance accessibility			
specific	... activities that contribute to the local economy			
specific	... activities that contribute to and/or preserve local culture			

## HRM SUSTAINABILITY FILTER - CHEAT SHEET FOR SUSTAINABLE DECISION-MAKING



### Sustainability Principle (SP) #1

Reduce and eventually eliminate our contribution to the ongoing build-up in nature of substances extracted from the Earth's crust (e.g. fossil fuels, heavy metals)

#### FAVOURING



- Energy efficiency and power from renewable sources
- Metals that are plentiful (aluminium, iron etc...)
- Re-usable, recyclable and recycled content materials

#### AVOIDING



- Energy inefficiency and fossil fuel power
- Metals that are scarce in nature (mercury, cadmium, lead, nickel etc...)
- Disposable, non-recyclable and materials made from unused resources



### Sustainability Principle (SP) #2

Reduce and eventually eliminate our contribution to the ongoing build-up in nature of man-made substances (e.g. persistent compound/chemicals)

#### FAVOURING



- Natural, biodegradable materials (glass wood, cotton, water-based etc.)
- Materials that are managed in tight technical cycles (re-used, recycled)
- Organically grown, untreated
- Re-usable, recyclable and recycled content materials

#### AVOIDING



- Petroleum-based and synthetic (esp. toxic and hazardous) materials
- Materials that are likely to be dispersed into nature
- Chemically grown, treated
- Disposable, non-recyclable and materials made from unused resources



### Sustainability Principle (SP) #3

Reduce and eventually eliminate our contribution to physically damaging natural systems that serve us (e.g. water filtration)

#### FAVOURING



- Materials from well-managed ecosystems
- Fast-growing crops (hemp, bamboo etc...)
- Use of previously developed lands
- Re-usable, recyclable and recycled content materials

#### AVOIDING



- Over-harvested resources
- Slow-growing, resource-intensive methods
- Use of undeveloped green space
- Disposable, non-recyclable and materials made from unused resources



### Sustainability Principle (SP) #4

Reduce our contribution to the creation of societies in which many people cannot meet their basic needs

#### FAVOURING



- Safe working and living conditions
- Inclusive and transparent decision-making
- Affordable products and services; sufficient resources for livelihood
- Political freedom

#### AVOIDING



- Unsafe living and working conditions
- Exclusive and closed decision-making
- Unaffordable products and services; economic barriers
- Political oppression

## 1. Is it a stepping stone (flexible platform) toward success and sustainability?

#### FAVOURING



- Efficiency measures (e.g. reduction of consumption, energy efficiency)
- Technical solutions that are adaptable and scalable
- Actions that build broader support for sustainability initiatives

#### AVOIDING



- Actions that tie you into using current technologies
- Partial solutions that cannot be further developed (i.e. dead-ends)
- Capital investments that lock you into a single way of doing things

## 2. Does it provide a good return on investment

#### FAVOURING



- Actions that lead to cost reductions, time savings, efficient use of materials and other resources; quick early wins
- Actions that will generate new revenue streams
- Capital investments that will build social capital (e.g. buy-in and support)

#### AVOIDING



- Actions that tie up too much capital in partial solutions
- Actions where the benefit does not outweigh the cost
- Actions that create high levels of risk (ecological, social or economic)
- Actions that do not align with new ecological/economic/social standards



**Implementation Guidelines:** Environmental Implications Section of Regional Council and Committee Reports

**Preamble**

Halifax Regional Municipality is committed to incorporate Environmental Sustainability as a balanced decision making criteria in corporate decisions. Since 2005, HRM has been working with staff to better integrate Environmental Sustainability in the Corporate Culture. One of the outcomes of this effort has been the development, testing and recommended implication of a Sustainability Filter for Council and Committee Reports.

**Action**

Following the investigation and testing of various environmental sustainability filters, it has been recommended, and approved, that a simple and flexible approach be taken. This will enable continuation of development of corporate culture around environmental sustainability and the simple articulation of environmental implications in reports to Committee and Council.

**Intent**

The intent of this addition, as approved by the Executive Committee, on February 27, 2012 to the standard Report Format is to very briefly articulate the Environmental Implications of the Recommended Actions of a Report. It is expected that this section be no more than a couple of bullets.

**Guidelines**

As a guideline, the primary Environmental Implications of priority to the municipality include: Water Quality, Energy Consumption, and Solid Waste Management.

Examples of Environmental Implications:

- Action reduces Community Energy Consumption
- Action risks to Water Quality which are mitigated by Policy xx and / or Action yy.
- Purchase utilized Environmental Certification: (EcoLogo , etc)
- Purchase was evaluated using Life Cycle Costing
- Contracted Item deals with end of life disposal by requiring supplier to take back at end of useful life
- Capital Projects recommended based on a tool that adopts community environmental sustainability parameters as evaluation metrics
- Project required under Regional Plan to enable achievement of Urban growth targets
- Project (ie Development Agreement) meets all Council approved Environmental Policy
- Action will help reduce corporate GHG's by xx per year
- Action / project is as per Regional Plan direction

If the context of the report requires further explanation of the Environmental Implications: that would be expected to be contained within the Discussion Section of the report. (For example a report on the Urban Forest Master Plan may include a piece, in the discussion section, articulating the ecological benefits of trees and the quantification of those benefits). In that case, it would be perfectly acceptable to simply state in the Environmental Implications section: Articulated in Discussions Section of Report.

If a report does not have a considered Environmental Implications, it is not expected that staff would reach to articulate one. For example, if purchasing a Fire Truck, or a Road Grader, there may not be a reasonable opportunity to consider Environmental Implications. In that case, simply state: Implications not identified.

It is not anticipated additional coaching or training is required for implementation of this section. You do not require an additional approval for this section. However, Energy and Environment Staff are prepared to assist

Report Writers as required. We will review reports following implementation of this action to investigate where there may be opportunities to:

1. Assist staff with other environmental solutions or options in future;
2. Improve the articulation of the Environmental Implications in future reports;

For help, Energy and Environment Staff can be contacted as follows:

Richard MacLellan	maclelri@halifax.ca	490-6056
Cameron Deacoff	deacofc@halifax.ca	490-1926
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Angus Doyle	doylean@halifax.ca	490-5019

The commitment to Regional Council and Executive Management is that the staff implications of this requirement will be absolutely minimal. This should be no greater than a brief pause to your report writing. Current Council approved policy, including Procurement Policy and Regional Plan, clearly direct staff to consider environmental implications when making recommendations and planning action. This is not new. As such, a brief articulation of how we considered the implications in our reports should not create a burden on staff time.

I look forward to your help in the implementation of this action.

Thank you,

Richard MacLellan  
Manager, Energy and Environment