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Item No. 15.1.9
Halifax Regional Council
July 9, 2024

TO: Mayor Savage and Members of Halifax Regional Council

FROM: Cathie O'Toole, Chief Administrative Officer

DATE: July 3, 2024

SUBJECT: Homelessness Update July 2024

ORIGIN

June 4, 2024 Halifax Regional Council, item 15.1.6 Strategic Opportunities to Address Homelessness

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The homelessness crisis continues to deepen in the Municipality. The number of people identifying as homeless grows each week and more and more people are being forced to sleep rough in municipal park and event spaces. While the municipality has designated locations for people to sleep rough those sites are oversubscribed by almost 300%. From single tents to growing encampments, people are sheltering in many undesignated different municipal parks and event spaces. New spaces are needed while the municipality waits for additional provincial resources, such as pallet shelters and tiny homes, to become available. Staff are currently preparing a new site in Dartmouth at the intersection of Bancroft Lane and Marketplace Drive. It will, however, not be ready until September or October.

Staff have completed a review of available park spaces in HRM and recommend that the following five spaces are the best options the municipality has to create additional designated locations for those sleeping rough until new provincial resources become available. Of the five top priority sites three are in Halifax: Cogswell Park, Glebe Street Park and the Berm on the Halifax Commons located at the corner of North Park Street and Cogswell Street; and two are in Dartmouth: the lower section of Farrell Street Park and Starr Park.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Halifax Regional Council:

1. Endorse the list of potential designated locations herein and direct the CAO to designate locations for sheltering as required, based on this list.
2. Update the list of criteria describing where sheltering is not permitted consistent with the information in this report.

INTRODUCTION

The Halifax Regional Municipality continues to struggle with a growing homelessness and housing crisis. As of June 25, 2024 the by-name list has grown to 1,316 people. In HRM's 4 designated locations, there are 88 tents or structures, in space that is suitable for 30. In addition, there are nine tents in Northbrook Park, 6 at Grafton Street Park, and multiple encampments in many other locations. HRM staff estimate there are between 140 and 150 people sleeping rough in the urban areas of the city with more people in rural areas.

HRM's approach to the homelessness crisis continues to evolve as various Provincial resources become available and based on the specific needs of those sleeping rough in various spaces. Current initiatives include:

1. ongoing humanitarian aid support to persons sleeping rough in HRM.
2. active referrals to Provincial shelters and other housing resources, supports, and needed services.
3. the creation of additional designated locations, to both relocate those sheltering in non-designated park spaces and reduce overcrowding in designated spaces. This includes exploring the creation of an encampment site at the junction of Bancroft Lane and Marketplace Drive, as well as potentially designating other municipal spaces for sleeping rough.
4. review of the criteria for prohibited spaces, where people are not permitted to shelter and must relocate within 24 hours if they attempt to set up a tent and camping site.
5. developing options to reduce the impact of encampments on both the people sheltering in them and on the surrounding community.
6. supporting the Province of Nova Scotia in the establishment of pallet shelter communities in HRM.

DISCUSSION

Update on Bancroft and Marketplace Encampment Site

In June 2024, Halifax Regional Council approved \$788,000 for the development of a new designated encampment site. A proposed site for a designated encampment has been identified on HRM-owned land located at the intersection of Marketplace Drive and Bancroft Lane in Dartmouth. The new site will provide approximately 3000 m² of space for tents and other site facilities such as toilets and garbage disposal. The project will involve clearing bushes and trees, grading the site, and preparing access roads and pathways. Concrete pads will be created for site structures such as porta pottie bathroom facilities. The location of the site provides easy access to Halifax Transit and other amenities. The site itself will be fenced on three sides with permanent fencing allowing access only from Bancroft Lane. Vegetative buffers will be left in place to provide privacy for the site and businesses that are nearby. Preliminary design is ongoing, and staff will be seeking a contractor to complete the work. It is anticipated that the site will be ready for use in mid-September or early October 2024. Timing is pending however until the HRM receives bids from contractors.

The preparation of this site as a designated location will also include \$50,000 of clean up to an adjacent site also owned by HRM.

Potential Designated Locations

In June 2022, Halifax Regional Council endorsed a set of criteria to help inform decisions about suitable and unsuitable locations for sleeping rough. At that time, 4 designated outdoor sheltering locations were established.

Also, at that time, the by-name list stood at 616 people and fewer than 60 people were sleeping rough. A variety of sheltering and housing projects were pending completion that were anticipated to reduce the number of people on the by-name list and the number of those sleeping rough. Since then, despite continued growth in supportive housing and indoor sheltering options the by-name list has grown to 1,316 (as of June

25, 2024) and the number of people sleeping rough is between 140 and 150.

Staff were recently directed to develop a ranked list of suitable additional designated locations within the municipality. Staff undertook a review of all parks against the 2022 criteria, which were:

Locations cannot be:

- within 50 metres of a school, daycare, or adult care facility;
- on active sports fields, dugouts, or bleachers;
- within horticultural displays or gardens;
- within cemeteries;
- near environmentally or culturally sensitive areas;
- blocking a path or right of access;
- on bridges, docks, or piers;
- near playgrounds, pools, or splash pads
- near skateboard parks or sports courts;
- near picnic shelters, gazebos;
- near recreation facilities; or
- in highly inaccessible spaces for individuals, services, and support providers.

In addition to these criteria, staff were to consider the following, among other relevant considerations, when evaluating a proposed location:

- proximity or availability of public washrooms, park washrooms, or another toilet option;
- proximity to a potable water source for drinking and handwashing;
- proximity to public transit;
- proximity to services and supports residents need;
- site safety;
- site privacy;
- site maintenance services (including vehicular access and garbage removal);
- potential of damage to the site;
- risk of conflict with other users of space and the resident.

With more designated sites needed, the ability to consider a range of criteria is reduced and designated locations become more likely to be spaces where conflict will arise.

In order to inform a list of potential designated locations, staff reviewed all park spaces in the municipality. Non-park sites have been considered on an ad hoc basis but a thorough review of all municipally owned non-park sites has not been completed.

For parks, the process included:

- removing all parks in the most rural districts (1, 2 & 13), while there is homelessness in those districts, the need for designated sites is most intense in more urban areas with more access to services and community.
- Removing parks that met the 2022 criteria above for non-suitable locations (e.g. near schools, in cemeteries, on/near active sports fields).
- There were a few exceptions to this, e.g. some very large parks, that had park assets such as playgrounds or sport courts, were considered separately.
- Several parks were removed as they are not owned by HRM and/or for which HRM does not have a current lease agreement.
- Several parks were considered to be culturally sensitive and removed from consideration, this includes Africville Park, Grafton Street Park (Halifax Memorial Library Site), the Daffodil Garden for Cancer Survivors, and the Public Gardens.

- Several parks were removed for specific reasons, e.g. Ardmore Park due to the presence of the service dog park, and Rotary Park, which has a current agreement with the adjacent restaurant owner.
- Parks that have current or planned capital improvements or recently completed capital projects or major state of good repair projects were also removed.
- Staff also recommend for both reasons of public access to water and safety, that beaches should be added as locations where sheltering is prohibited.
- As an objective criterion, proximity to transit was considered, for accessibility and access to services. Sites that were more than 500m from a transit stop were excluded from further consideration.

In addition to technical considerations, a subjective review is also required as specific circumstances or unique aspects of a site can alter the viability of a location.

At the end of this initial analysis, a number of sites were set aside for further review as they were within 50m of assets identified by the criteria such as sports fields or bleachers but could potentially be considered due to the large size of space. Staff reviewed these sites and based on knowledge of the sites, included some for consideration as designated locations. Close to 90 parks did not violate the criteria and were closer than 500m to a transit stop. Staff reviewed these sites, and based on knowledge of the sites, included some for consideration as designated locations. Many others of these parks appear to be small, neighbourhood parks surrounded closely by residential dwellings and appear unsuitable as designated locations. In the time allotted, staff did not have the opportunity for a thorough on-site assessment of each park. A further review of parks can be completed but initial analysis indicates they will not yield many additional potential designated spaces.

Parks are often situated in neighbourhoods, including as dedicated spaces through the subdivision process, and as such are often positioned within heavily residential areas, since these residents are the population originally meant to be served by parks. Apartment dwellers and an increasing immigrant population use parks extensively. Previous reports have spoken about the impact of encampments on those living in them and on the surrounding neighbourhoods, and of the fatigue of neighbourhood residents. Those living in encampments have no choice but to have all kinds of interactions in public, which for those living in homes, would take place in private. This does not change that there are typically negative impacts associated with living next to an encampment and these impacts increase the potential for conflict between those within and outside of an encampment.

Based on this review the following parks, or a portion of that park, are recommended as potential sites for additional designated locations for persons sleeping rough as required.

Parks in Halifax	Parks in Dartmouth
Bayers Road Windsor Street Park	Bisset Road ⁴
BiHi park	Farrell Street Park
Chain Lake Park ¹	Starr Park
Cogswell Park	
Glebe Street Park	
Halifax Common(berm) ²	
Point Pleasant Park ³	

Regional Council should be aware that based on the technical review, the following former designated locations below also meet the criteria and would be recommended sites as designated locations. Previous communication has indicated the municipality’s intent not to re-open- de-designated locations, however Beaufort Park and Geary Street Green Space in particular, are options that are as good or better than some of the other parks noted in the table above. Geary Street Green Space may be a better option than Farrell Street Park given the neighbourhood around Farrell street park (high economic deprivation) and the presence of a playground in the upper end of Farrell Street Park. As staff identified in the discussion related

to these sites, there are issues and impacts associated with re-designating locations, both among those experiencing homelessness and the general community around the sites.

Parks in Halifax	Parks in Dartmouth
Beaufort Park	Geary Street Green Space
Saunders Park	

1. This park has regular bookings, but there is considerable unused time each week. In addition, this space is a formal off season dog park.
2. The majority of the Halifax Common is not recommended as a designated location but the berm, located at the corner of North Park Street and Cogswell Road is only used infrequently and would be a popular spot with persons experiencing homelessness in terms of geography.
3. Point Pleasant Park has long hosted people sleeping rough. It is also an extremely busy park space. This location would require careful placement of the sheltering site to reduce the impact on other existing community use.
4. This large site was included where it has previously been identified but would require the addition of a new transit route or other plans for transportation which would incur significant additional non-budgeted costs.

In terms of absolute priority, it is difficult to rank the parks as first choice, second choice etc. The best choice for a location is not just based on the space, but also on the people who are intended to use it and their needs. That said, dividing the list above into two tiers, the first spaces recommended for use are:

- Cogswell Park
- Farrell Street Park
- Glebe Street Park
- Starr Park
- Halifax Commons Berm

The other sites identified in the review would be second tier options, to be used once the first-tier spaces have been utilized.

All of the above potential sites have drawbacks associated with them and some are very small however they represent sites of somewhat lower likelihood of conflict in locations that remain relatively close to services and community. In addition, some of the sites will require preparation for this use, including the installation of fencing and additional signage.

Pallet Shelter Villages

Currently two pallet shelter villages have been set up in HRM. One village, with 19 shelters, is set up in Sackville, in conjunction with the Beacon House shelter. A second village, with 41 shelters, is being prepared on Atlantic Street in Dartmouth. This village will be focused on providing support for seniors experiencing homelessness.

There are still approximately 80 pallet shelters to be set up in HRM. The municipality continues to work with the Province of Nova Scotia to find locations for these resources so that they can be deployed and help reduce the number of people forced to sleep rough in municipal parks and event spaces. The goal is to have these pallet shelters available this fall.

Relocation of people sheltering at Grafton Street Park

On Tuesday morning, July 2, 2024 municipal staff issued notices to the six individuals sheltering at Grafton Street Park, the former site of the Halifax Memorial Library. For several months this site has been clearly

signed as a no camping area. For the past couple of months, staff have been working one individual to find alternative accommodation. The numbers have recently grown so staff felt it was necessary to ask people to relocate. Staff have confirmed that there is space for these people at the Multi-Purpose Centre at the Halifax Forum as well as at designated locations. As staff have done previously in similar situations, individuals have been given a deadline and in this case it is until end of day on Monday July 15, 2024, to relocate. Municipal and Business Improvement District outreach staff will provide support to help them relocate, including options for transportation and storage.

Staff have been reviewing park spaces regularly and now consider this location to be a culturally sensitive site and, going forward intend to treat it as a prohibited site.

Northbrook Park

Northbrook Park is a small park space located in Dartmouth bordering on Richmond Street. It contains a playground structure, and a trail runs through it. Currently thirteen people are sheltering in the park. Some people are sheltering there as they are unable to stay at Green Road designated location due to overcrowding. While there is some space at the Multi-Purpose Centre at the Halifax Forum there is not sufficient space in a designated location for those who are unable to use or access the shelter.

The large number of people in this small space has made the park unusable for others in the community. This space was frequently used by day cares and local families who now don't feel safe going there. There is active drug use in the encampment, regular disturbances that impact those around the park, and some community members have been chased out of the park by those sheltering there.

Staff intend to prioritize the relocation of individuals sheltering in this location as soon as new designated locations are confirmed. As we have done previously, once locations are identified people sheltering there will be given notices to relocate, with time to consider their options. HRM staff will provide support to help people relocate, including transportation and storage assistance.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are some potential costs listed in the report, such as signage or small amounts of fencing that may be required depending on what, if any, additional designated locations are set up. At this time these activities can be completed with previously approved operating budgets.

RISK CONSIDERATION

1. While the site at Bancroft and Marketplace has been examined by staff and contractors the possibility of encountering an unknown issue during the preparatory phase of this work exists. Staff will address these issues if they occur and will provide Regional Council with an update as the work continues.
2. Persons experiencing homelessness may find the Bancroft and Marketplace site too far away from needed services and supports and refuse to go there, seeking sheltering opportunities in non-designated and prohibited locations. HRM may have to take a stronger stance on requiring people to use designated locations, if sufficient spaces exist.
3. Since there will be alternative options available for people to shelter outside, we expect voluntary compliance with requests to relocate from a specific location. It is possible that people will refuse to relocate. In those circumstances staff will work 1:1 with individuals to address their concerns and provide support to them. Persons sheltering in parks can be required to relocate as long as alternative options are available, such as an indoor shelter or designated location. If those efforts fail, HRM may have to request assistance from Halifax Regional Police.

COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

In preparing this report staff have considered the recommendations from previous community consultation efforts. Staff have also reviewed unsolicited feedback from various individuals who have reached out through 311 or directly to staff.

Usually through a local Councillor, there have been requests from residents and businesses around an encampment site for an opportunity to discuss the impacts of the encampment. The focus of these discussions are not to seek approval from the community, but rather look for opportunities to integrate people into the larger community, address concerns, and look at options to mitigate any potential negative impacts. Staff will evaluate these requests if or when they arise throughout the process.

ALTERNATIVES

Halifax Regional Council could:

1. Not endorse the list of potential sites for designation as encampment locations.
2. Direct the CAO to consider additional sites as encampment locations or remove sites from the list.

LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

Halifax Regional Municipality Charter, S.N.S. 2008, c. 39

7A The purposes of the municipality are to

...

- (b) provide services, facilities, and other things that, in the opinion of the Council, are necessary or desirable for all or part of the municipality; and
- (c) develop and maintain safe and viable communities

79A (1) Subject to subsections (2) to (4), the municipality may only spend money for municipal purposes if

- (a) the expenditure is included in the municipality's operating budget or capital budget or is otherwise authorized by the municipality; ...

Halifax Regional Municipality By-law P-600 Respecting Municipal Parks

Camping

8. (1) Camping is prohibited in a park unless otherwise posted or by permission.

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