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Item No. 8
Halifax Regional Council
February 7, 2023

TO: Mayor Savage and Members of Halifax Regional Council

SUBMITTED BY: Original Signed

Cathie O'Toole, Chief Administrative Officer

DATE: February 1, 2023

SUBJECT: Green Network Plan Coordination and Resourcing

INFORMATION REPORT

ORIGIN

On January 25, 2022 the following motion of Regional Council was put and passed regarding item 18.5.

“THAT Halifax Regional Council recommend that the Chief Administrative Officer be directed to prepare a staff report outlining an overall policy and process to coordinate the work of the departments of Planning and Development and Parks and Recreation. The aim is to ensure council can effectively implement HalifACT, IMP and the Green Network Plan. The staff report should consider the need for a coordinator to lead the Green Network Plan and an updated parks strategy, in light of the following:

- 1. The current Parks Canada urban park planning process for Blue Mountain-Birch Cove Lakes,*
- 2. The pending Sandy Lake study,*
- 3. Recently identified key wildlife corridors,*
- 4. HRM's natural asset inventory, and*
- 5. Housing development pressures.”*

LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

Halifax Regional Municipality Charter, 229 (1) A municipal planning strategy must include statements of policy respecting

- (e) any other matter prescribed by the regulations.*

Minimum Planning Requirements Regulations, clauses 6 (g), 8(a), and 9(f), (h)

6 A municipal planning strategy may include statements of policy on the use, content, development, and administration of the following:

(g) studies to be carried out before undertaking specified developments or developments in specified areas;

8 A municipal planning strategy may include statements of policy on any of the following:

(a) municipal investment for public and private development and coordinating public programs

- relating to the economic, social and physical development of the municipality;
9. A municipal planning strategy may include statements of policy on any of the following:
- (f) stormwater management and erosion control;
 - (h) identifying, protecting, using and developing any of the following:
 - (i) lands subject to flooding,
 - (ii) steep slopes,
 - (iii) lands susceptible to subsidence, erosion or other geological hazards, and

BACKGROUND

The Regional Plan, with the underpinning guiding principle of enhancing quality of life, contains region-wide policies to define where, when, and how future growth and development should take place. Since the adoption of the Regional Plan in 2014, Regional Council has approved priorities plans to work towards these goals for a sustainable region. Three recent plans include the Integrated Mobility Plan (IMP), the Halifax Green Network Plan (HGPN), and HalifACT, the co-ordination of which is the subject of this report.

The Integrated Mobility Plan (IMP)

The IMP¹ was endorsed by Regional Council in 2017 and envisioned the creation of connected, healthy, affordable and sustainable travel options by rethinking and transforming the mobility network. The four principles include complete communities, moving people, managing congestion, and integrating solutions to support the vision of the IMP. The Plan's goals focus on prioritizing the movement of people over vehicles, improving accessibility, creating links between people and communities, strengthening the relationship between transportation and land use decisions, and rethinking and redesigning the transportation system and communities.

The Halifax Green Network Plan (HGPN)

The HGPN² was approved by Regional Council in 2018 to define an interconnected open space system for the municipality. The plan highlights the function and benefits of ecosystems and outlines strategies on how to manage open space to maintain ecologically and culturally important land and aquatic systems, promote sustainable use of natural resources and economically important open spaces, and identify and define suitable land for parks and corridors.

HalifACT

HalifACT³, the Municipality's climate action plan, was approved by Regional Council in 2020 to build a healthy, resilient future and prepare for the impacts of climate change. Through HalifACT, the Municipality has made a commitment to reduce emissions, switch to clean and reliable energy sources, prepare for current and future climate impacts, and demonstrate local government leadership.

DISCUSSION

Co-ordination Among the Plans

The Regional Plan is currently under review. Once completed, the updated Regional Plan will clarify how the three priority plans will be implemented through the organization of land use and the settlement pattern. Planning & Development is responsible for leading the Integrated Mobility Plan and Green Network Plan and participates directly in the HalifACT project. To see how each priority plan will be accommodated within Regional Plan policy, please see the latest Regional Plan Workplan, as provided in Appendix E of the Phase 3 Regional Plan Review Amendment Package Report⁴.

¹ Full IMP document available [here](#).

² Full HGPN Network Plan document available [here](#).

³ Full HalifACT document available [here](#).

⁴ <https://www.shapeyourcityhalifax.ca/12651/widgets/131284/documents/86590>

It is helpful to think about plan coordination in two scales: at the regional/community scale and at the local or site level. At the site level, development can be organized and designed to protect ecologically important places and features, using green infrastructure to mitigate environmental impacts, and connecting places by prioritizing alternatives to cars. These design parameters can support climate actions by reducing emissions and preserving the natural environment.

To provide Regional Council with the opportunity to consider the relationship between the site level and priority plans, Phase 3 of the Regional Plan Review amendment package prioritized the consideration of all priority plans through the creation of Policies G-9A and G-14A. These policies require consideration of the IMP, the HGNP, and HalifACT when assessing discretionary planning applications, including those for future serviced communities. Council can assess the strategic goals of these plans when reviewing staff recommendations on projects through the discretionary planning process. The package of amendments was approved by Regional Council on October 11, 2022.

At the regional scale, staff continue to use modelling to evaluate proposed settlement pattern scenarios against transportation mode-share and carbon emission targets. As part of Phase 4 of the Regional Plan Review, staff will conduct a “complete communities” analysis to provide another lens to help Regional Council assess how settlement is aligned with quality of life. This work will involve consulting with different departments and agencies to identify how capital budgets and service delivery planning align with potential future housing redevelopment and intensification. This will include mobility needs (proximity to transit, active transportation, and pedestrian networks) as well as proximity to parks and recreation assets.

At the regional scale, the long-term protection of ecologically sensitive and important parks, trails, and green spaces for public use is a primary consideration. In addition to HRM’s work on wildlife corridors⁵, staff will continue to research how we can quantify and qualify the contribution of protected green spaces as a public benefit. We know that these spaces play a critical role in contributing towards public health and climate outcomes such as access to recreation opportunities, increased mental and physical health and providing multiple ecosystem services, such as water storage and filtering and carbon storage. Staff have recently begun a pilot project to quantify the economic value of the ecosystem services provided by forests and wetlands. This information and assessment will be important to provide a foundation for Regional Council in making investments to protect these natural assets.

As we have a better understanding of the regional/community scale, we can create specific policies and regulations that direct development at the site level, through land use by-law regulations. For example, once we understand the location of wilderness corridors and where there is significant development risk to these corridors, adjustments to land use by-laws either through the Regional Plan Review or future Community planning can be considered.

Coordination Between Business Units

Across the three priority plans, the resources allocated to implement the framework differ, which also impacts coordination. While the IMP and HalifACT have formed dedicated teams, the implementation framework for the HGNP has not proceeded in the same direction as the two other plans. This is further explained below.

The Transportation Planning Team within Planning & Development consists of 14 staff members who are led by the Strategic Transportation Manager. Their work is driven by the Integrated Mobility Plan. The IMP Team is made up of a cross functional working team with 12 to 18 participants. The IMP Team meets on a quarterly basis to consider barriers to implementation of the IMP and problem solve across business units. The IMP Senior Leadership Team, made up of Executive Directors and Directors from Public Works, Planning & Development, and Transit, have met monthly since adoption of the Plan. Regional Council is subsequently updated through a newsletter on a quarterly basis. The IMP Team reports on Key

⁵ <https://cdn.halifax.ca/sites/default/files/documents/city-hall/regional-council/230124rci05.pdf>

Performance Indicators on an annual basis as part of other corporate progress tracking reports. Progress can also be tracked using the online IMP Dashboard.⁶

The Energy and Environment group, composed of 15 staff, was moved from Planning & Development to Property, Fleet & Environment as a new division, Environment and Climate Change (ECC), on April 1, 2022 and continues to grow in staff resources. ECC staff developed a shared accountability framework to assign each HalifACT action to a leading business unit and advises, supports, and collaborates with all business units.⁷ Although ECC leads many of the HalifACT actions, it also assists business units in leading their own actions, reviewing the actions, discussing required resources, and identifying barriers to implementation. On an annual basis, the business units report to ECC on the progress of HalifACT's actions, which are then reported to Council, key stakeholders, and the public. In fall 2022, a new governance model for implementing HalifACT was approved by the Senior Leadership Team. ECC is working to launch formal, supported working groups for some priority focus areas this spring, which will include coordination with the shared objectives of the HGNP.

Monitoring the progress of the HGNP has thus far been assigned to a Planner III in the Regional and Community Planning Division of Planning & Development. This position is focused on implementing and achieving the land use actions contained in the HGNP, which are detailed under Section 6.1 of the document. The staff position is also responsible for providing annual updates to Regional Council on the work program and actions. As the Regional Plan Review has been a key focus for implementation of the HGNP, staff have not created a cross-functional team, however, there is a significant amount of cross-functional work occurring as part of the Regional Plan Review. For example, Planning & Development and HalifACT staff have met regularly over the past few months with staff from Nova Scotia Environment and Climate Change and wetland advocates to understand how to improve coordination and protection of wetlands.

Coordination between Planning & Development and Parks & Recreation

Many of the actions in the HGNP are owned by Parks & Recreation, and these are detailed under Section 6.2 of the HGNP. Parks & Recreation are also the lead on many different park planning projects, such as Blue Mountain-Birch Cove National Urban Park Initiative. Planning & Development and Parks & Recreation staff participate on projects together on an as-needed basis. Sometimes, there are interactions between land use and the areas designated as park. In these instances, staff work together to identify the relationship between the lands identified for development, ecological services, and the existing park boundary and acquisition process, as requested by Regional Council. Under the Regional Plan Review, staff have also been researching best practices for managing land use and settlement patterns adjacent to significant ecological assets, such as a Regional Park or significant wetlands or watercourses. Several actions in the HGNP that are focused on determining appropriate level of service for parks in different parts of the region have not yet been fully implemented.

Assessment of Existing Resources

Regional Council requested that staff evaluate the need for a coordinator to lead the HGNP and an updated parks strategy. In assessing this need, Planning & Development staff have met with key owners of actions in the HGNP, including representatives of Planning & Development, Public Works, Parks & Recreation and Property, Fleet and Environment.

Through this assessment of priorities, work with key stakeholders, and a review of the structure of most successful priority plans, such as the Integrated Mobility Plan, staff do not have a recommendation on what type of staff team is required at this time. As many new staff are currently being onboarded in various business units, staff advise that it would be premature to recruit a full staff team. Instead, a temporary coordinator position could be of benefit to help the business units come together and manage a governance

⁶ <https://www.halifax.ca/about-halifax/regional-community-planning/transportation-planning/imp-monitoring-evaluation>

⁷ <https://cdn.halifax.ca/sites/default/files/documents/city-hall/standing-committees/221103essc1214.pdf>
<https://cdn.halifax.ca/sites/default/files/documents/city-hall/regional-council/220121cow05.pdf>

process, particularly while staff are focused on delivering the Regional Plan Review. This coordinator would be assigned to Planning & Development and work across the various business units to determine where the greatest weaknesses are in achieving deliverables, and what additional resources might be required, while comparing against existing staff expertise, and identifying any overlaps between deliverables.

It is anticipated that an internal working group and Executive Director/ Director Senior Leadership Team would be formed, similar to the IMP Team structure. Staff would use this time to develop a stronger phasing plan for staffing or consulting work required to help support staff resources, which would help Council consider what resources might be required over time. In 2023, HalifACT will establish specific working groups. One of these will be focused on nature-based climate solutions. This may be used to support cross-business unit collaborative working group on nature-based climate solutions and may even be able to act as the Green Network Plan internal working group.

Conclusion

There are differences between staffing and resourcing when comparing three of the latest priorities plans. While IMP and HalifACT have dedicated teams to develop an operating framework and compel actions, the HGNP has not been resourced in the same manner. After the approval of the HGNP, it had been determined that land use recommendations will be implemented through the Regional Plan Review, and a full staff team was not required at that time. Since that time, development and growth pressures have changed and to ensure the appropriate levels of analysis are conducted to help Regional Council achieve its environmental goals and objectives, a temporary co-ordination function as described above would be beneficial.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Staff identified the funding needed for the coordinator position as part of the ongoing budget process for 2023/2024. Given the significant pressures on the budget this year, this position is not being brought forward to Regional Council for consideration this budget cycle. Instead, staff will focus on completing the Regional Plan review, assess if any work can be completed by consultants through existing budgets, and look to bring forward the request through the 2024/25 Budget and Business Planning process.

RISK CONSIDERATION

Many HGNP actions are interlinked with climate action initiatives, such as protecting and enhancing parks and wilderness areas and ensuring connectivity for wildlife. From a climate emergency perspective, there is an inherent risk of inaction on protecting wilderness and green spaces, especially when development pressures are high. Inaction can result in long-term costs that are exponentially higher, resiliency can become more difficult, and the physical and economic impacts of climate change will have the greatest effect on the most vulnerable sectors of society. There is risk that if HGNP is not fully implemented in a timely manner, it will be more difficult to achieve the actions set out in the Plan.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

All three priority plans were adopted following extensive public engagement.

The HGNP was informed by three phases of extensive engagement with residents from urban, suburban and rural communities, provincial government departments and stakeholder groups. Those consultations provided valuable insight to inform the vision, principles, objectives, and actions within the HGNP. Additional public engagement will be carried out for individual HGNP action items as appropriate on a case-by-case basis.

The IMP was adopted following three phases of public engagement, which helped to identify and prioritize corridors that we want to connect using active transportation and transit. As staff work to turn those proposed corridors into on-the-ground infrastructure, individual project engagement programs consult with residents and community groups to get their input on these projects and to determine how the infrastructure can best support their needs.

The HalifACT engagement program involved workshops, pop-up sessions, conference presentations, stakeholder meetings, and online surveys. The engagement process increased awareness, facilitated discussions about strategies, tools and barriers to action, strengthened existing networks, and built new networks and partnerships to support implementation. The HalifACT team continues to provide regular community updates about ongoing efforts to advance the goals of the plan.⁸

The Regional Plan Review has undergone public engagement during Phase 2 (Themes & Directions) and Phase 3 (Quick Adjustments), and a comprehensive public engagement program will be undertaken as part of Phase 4. Information on the Regional Plan Review can be founded on the project website: <https://www.shapeyourcityhalifax.ca/regional-plan>

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

Environmental implications are outlined throughout this report.

ATTACHMENTS

None.

A copy of this report can be obtained online at halifax.ca or by contacting the Office of the Municipal Clerk at 902.490.4210.

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⁸ https://cdn.halifax.ca/sites/default/files/documents/about-the-city/energy-environment/cc_halifact_issue1communityupdate_web.pdf