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Item No. 15.1.5
Halifax Regional Council
October 17, 2023

TO: Mayor Savage and Members of Halifax Regional Council

SUBMITTED BY: Original Signed

Cathie O'Toole, Chief Administrative Officer

DATE: October 17, 2023

SUBJECT: Homelessness Strategy Update

ORIGIN

May 3, 2022, Halifax Regional Council Motion (Item No. 15.1.9):

MOVED by Councillor Smith, seconded by Councillor Stoddard

THAT Halifax Regional Council:

1. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to continue to support the Province and other partners to ensure individuals have safe, supportive and affordable housing,
5. Authorize the Chief Administrative Officer to negotiate and enter into a contribution agreement with the United Way to convene a lived experience committee to advise staff,
6. Direct the CAO to return to Council with a subsequent report with a subsequent report with an additional analysis and recommendations for actions, including a timeline and plan for supporting the transition of people, education and implementation that is lead and delivered by civilian staff.
7. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to provide a staff report on negotiating a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Province of Nova Scotia on supporting Unsheltered Residents of HRM. The report should include defining the roles of each order. of government and specific actions to support and prevent homelessness within the HRM.

MOTION AS AMENDED PUT AND PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.

MOVED by Councillor Smith, seconded by Councillor Stoddard

THAT Halifax Regional Council:

2. Direct the CAO to continue efforts to increase availability of affordable housing as described in the body of this report, and
4. Direct the CAO to continue to review options to add non-park sites to inventory of outdoor sites available for overnight sheltering,

Recommendation on Page 3

MOTION PUT AND PASSED.

MOVED by Councillor Smith, seconded by Councillor Stoddard

THAT Halifax Regional Council:

3. Direct the CAO to formalize criteria and locations for the designation of overnight sheltering sites in parks consistent with the criteria and locations described in the body of the staff report dated April 28, 2022, with the removal of the one-night camping sites, and addition of those sites to the list of potential longer term camping sites if required and possible to ensure adequate supply to meet demands to be brought back to Council for consideration.

MOTION AS AMENDED PUT AND PASSED.

June 14, 2022 Halifax Regional Council Motion (15.1.5)

MOVED by Councillor Mancini, seconded by Councillor Austin

THAT Halifax Regional Council endorse the proposed criteria and locations in municipal parks for designated camping intended for those experiencing homelessness.

MOTION PUT AND PASSED

September 12, 2023 Halifax Regional Council Motion (15.1.7)

MOVED by Councillor Cleary, seconded by Councillor Mason

THAT Halifax Regional Council:

1. direct the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to lease private property, if possible, as locations for persons experiencing homelessness to shelter.

MOTION PUT AND PASSED.

MOVED by Councillor Cleary, seconded by Councillor Mason

THAT Halifax Regional Council:

3. direct the CAO to establish additional encampments, temporary housing, or tiny home locations on all types of municipality-owned properties. Such sites may include rights of way, parking lots, and surplus lands.

MOTION PUT AND PASSED.

MOVED by Councillor Cleary, seconded by Councillor Mason

THAT Halifax Regional Council:

4. direct the CAO to write to the province requesting their immediate plans to create deeply affordable housing options in HRM, including the leasing of private property for persons experiencing homelessness and request the province provide on-site wrap-around services for homeless encampments that have over ten people.

MOTION AS AMENDED PUT AND PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.

MOVED by Councillor Cleary, seconded by Councillor Mason

THAT Halifax Regional Council:

5. direct the CAO to explore the options of the non-park property types outlined in the staff report dated September 4, 2023, as well as campgrounds, and outdoor facilities, as locations for unhoused persons who are sheltering in a vehicle.

MOTION PUT AND PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.

MOVED by Councillor Cleary, seconded by Councillor Mason

THAT Halifax Regional Council:

6. direct the CAO provide a staff report to explore the feasibility of purchasing and installing prefabricated structures, similar to the Sprung structures in Toronto, to provide rapid response emergency housing in HRM including funding opportunities for installation and operation, that include other orders of government and the private sector.

MOTION AS AMENDED PUT AND PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.

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.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that Halifax Regional Council endorse the approaches contained in this report.

BACKGROUND

The Halifax Regional Municipality is in the midst of a housing crisis.

The number of people experiencing homelessness continues to grow at a dramatically increasing rate. The By Name List, which records people who are homeless and looking for stable housing in HRM, has been over 1,000 people since August 2023. As of October 10, 2023, it is 1,014 people. This number does not

capture all those experiencing homelessness as some choose not to be added to the By Name list or are unknown to navigators and outreach staff; for example, people couch surfing or sleeping in their vehicles. In July 2023, 178 people were sleeping rough in municipal parks and on municipal property. The count in July was more than double the number of people sleeping rough in November 2022, and the number has grown further since July.

The solution to the homelessness and housing crisis is the creation of deeply affordable, supportive housing in various configurations. The impact of experiencing homelessness, especially sleeping rough, is devastating to the physical and mental health of the individual. Each day can be a struggle to obtain food, use the bathroom, access clean water, stay warm and dry, access the services they need, and take advantage of the few housing opportunities they can find. Encampments, by their very nature, also create challenges for the surrounding community. Communities around encampments struggle with the garbage and waste that is produced when people are forced to live outside, the loss of parks and other community spaces, the impact of panhandling, and the increased level of community disruption that can come with encampments. This disruption is associated with a range of factors, including issues associated with extreme poverty, people taking advantage of the most marginalized in our society, and issues associated with a higher incidence of co-morbidities that are difficult to address in such circumstances.

HRM has over 30 different encampment locations throughout the municipality. Five are designated encampment sites, while the majority are not. Several of them are also critically overcrowded. Grand Parade, Victoria Park, the Correctional Ball Field, and Geary Street are significantly over the proposed capacity. The overcrowding in all these spaces needs to be addressed.

In September 2023 Regional Council directed the CAO to look at various land options for supporting persons experiencing homelessness, designate further encampment locations, and look to support initiatives such as temporary housing options and tiny homes.

DISCUSSION

Designated Encampments

In June 2022, Regional Council endorsed the staff-recommended approach to providing places for people to shelter. Four park spaces were designated locations where unhoused persons could shelter, 2 in Halifax and 2 in Dartmouth. These locations included supports such as garbage collection and water delivery.

The approach included a process for adding designated locations if required.

"In the future, should the need for camping space exceed the capacity of these four locations, staff will consider adding designated locations in park spaces. Staff does not intend to return to Regional Council for feedback on additional locations but rather would apply the criteria indicated above and consult with the local Councillor. Additionally, the municipality will work with other levels of government to identify and request that provincially and federally owned spaces be made available where people could be permitted to shelter overnight."

This process was used to add a fifth designated location in Sackville as the need in that part of the community continued to grow.

With the continuing and dramatic increase in those experiencing homelessness and sleeping rough, overcrowded encampments, and even with an expected winter shelter run by the Province of Nova Scotia, new designated locations are urgently needed. After consultation with the applicable Councillors, staff intended to designate the following locations for encampments:

- Grand Parade with a proposed occupancy of 8 or fewer tents

- Victoria Park with a proposed occupancy of 12 or fewer tents
- The berms on University Avenue with a proposed occupancy of 6 or fewer tents
- Martins Park with a proposed occupancy of 4 or fewer tents
- Beaufort Park with a proposed occupancy of 4 or fewer tents
- Saunders Park with a proposed occupancy of 8 or fewer tents (if required)

With continued encampment sites, one option to reduce their larger negative impacts is placing support services and security directly within them. These types of services are provided in many of the existing indoor shelter options and have proven effective at addressing a number of problematic issues, both for residents of the shelter and the surrounding community. Staff continue to discuss these options with Provincial colleagues and will bring forward recommendations in the near future around these options.

It is also important to recognize that as the number of people experiencing homelessness continues to grow, and even with an expanded number of locations, the designated encampment site approach will not be able to provide sufficient space for all of those forced to sleep rough. Alternative sheltering options to support this growing population will be required. That said, for the foreseeable future, there will always be a segment of the homeless population that will be forced to sleep rough, and designated locations will have a role in the overall response to homelessness. One of those alternative options is the purchase of large, prefabricated structures for mass sheltering solutions. A report outlining this option is coming to Council later this fall. Another option is addressed later in this report. Staff will return to Regional Council in the coming months with a variety of options for consideration.

Winter shelter

The Province has committed to operating a winter emergency shelter for the 2023 – 2024 season. They have faced challenges in finding a suitable location. They continue to meet with potential landlords and will hopefully be in a position to announce details soon. A service provider has been confirmed to operate the shelter once the location is secured. HRM and Provincial staff have met and are committed to a strategy to open the shelter in phases, ensuring that some people can quickly be moved into the space with services and capacity expanded over the first weeks of operation. The strategy will hopefully allow some of the overcrowding in various spaces to be addressed as soon as possible.

Should the Province be unable to obtain a suitable location for the winter shelter, HRM will look at closing an indoor recreation space for the season to ensure people have the option to shelter inside for winter. As it did in 2021, when HRM had to use the Gray Arena as a winter shelter, this will cause significant disruption for many community organizations and businesses who have confirmed bookings in whichever space is chosen. These cancellations have ripple effects throughout the recreation facility network.

Based on current projections for the number of people experiencing homelessness in the next year, there will be extreme need and demand for this facility to stay open year-round to prevent people from being forced to return to municipal outdoor spaces in spring 2024. As soon as the winter shelter is confirmed, HRM staff will work with their Provincial colleagues to confirm this space as an additional year-round sheltering space.

Finally, the proposed winter shelter is a communal living space, and experience indicates that some people will not succeed in this living situation. As such, the municipality knows that some people will have no option but to live outside this winter, as in previous winters. To help support those in this situation, the municipality will work with Provincial staff and service providers to try and ensure that those people have suitable equipment and materials to manage the colder and harsher weather.

Temporary Housing Options

The Province of Nova Scotia recently announced that it is purchasing two hundred Pallet Shelters¹. These are temporary housing structures that are single-room occupancy. They have space for a bed, chair, some storage, are winterized, and sit on flat ground. They can be connected to power but do not have plumbing. Washroom and water access must be addressed separately. The intention is not to place all one hundred shelters at a single location but to spread them out in multiple 'villages.' Each village would be supported by a service provider contracted to do so through the Province.

One of the opportunities created by using multiple sites is that some can be designated for a target population. For example, a village could be created that is substance-free. This would allow community members who need housing to have a home and community free from substance abuse. This is critically important for someone who might be struggling with their sobriety. Similarly, villages focus on couples, a harm reduction model, or other various specific concerns. Wrap-around supports provided by the service providers can then be structured based on the target population of their particular village. It may also be necessary to create some sequestered units for those who need a greater level of isolation to be successful.

Location is one of the key next steps in setting up temporary housing villages. For the shelters that will be located in HRM, the Province has committed to providing some sites, and HRM will also provide some locations. The municipality has also been in conversations with Canada Lands, looking at options to support a Pallet Shelter village on a portion of the Shannon Park lands. In addition, HRM will provide some help in preparing sites for the structures, as well as general site maintenance services.

HRM sites for these structures could include:

- Various surplus HRM properties designated for affordable housing
- Parking lot J at the corner of Bell Road and Sackville Street
- The spare side lot of the Sackville Sports Stadium
- Young Street parking lot of the Halifax Forum
- The Green Road encampment site

Tiny Homes

The Province recently announced a tiny home pilot project. Tiny Homes is a well-tested housing solution utilized in many other jurisdictions. The tiny homes proposed in this pilot are approximately 200 sq ft, including a small porch and a bathroom in each unit, and are laid out similarly to a bachelor apartment. HRM has agreed to allow this pilot to be set up on existing surplus HRM land, the former Correctional ball field in Sackville.

While planning is in the initial stages, staff have identified key components that must be addressed, such as one of the recommended sites currently has 30-plus individuals sheltering who may be required to relocate while site preparation and construction begin this winter. Also, this work will generate many questions and create significant stress for community members. Community engagement, consultation, and a robust community strategy will be critical, and HRM has committed to engaging lived expertise as part of this process.

The pilot aims to have 30 homes ready for move-in in the summer of 2024. Like the temporary housing initiative, HRM will provide site maintenance services such as snow clearing and grounds maintenance once the construction is completed.

Community members living in their vehicles

Many people have lost their housing but still have a vehicle. In some cases, these people choose to live in

¹ [Pallet Shelter](#)

their vehicle rather than entering a shelter (if space is available) or living in a tent in a park.

With financial support from the Province of Nova Scotia, the municipality will arrange a spot for recreation vehicles to stay within the Shubie Campground. This will be done in partnership with the existing operator of the community campground and will only be available for recreation vehicles. People choosing to access this service will have limited power service, but the standard campground washroom and water services will not be available as they are not winterized. Some form of waste management is possible, and the details are being explored at this time. The goal is to have this in place by November 1st, when other campgrounds close.

For people who shelter in their cars, many of them stop overnight in commercial parking lots. Municipal staff will continue to work toward identifying suitable locations where someone sheltering in their car can park without fear of ticketing or towing.

The importance of community

As identified in the 2022 HRM Lived Expertise Consultation and best and promising practices in addressing homelessness, developing a sense of community is critical to the success of any housing initiative. The tiny homes community and pallet shelter villages will all need to be designed and operated to build a sense of community among the residents and with service providers.

HRM will engage persons with lived expertise in helping to understand what, beyond basic housing needs and supports, people will need for these initiatives to be as successful as possible. This work will include engaging with provincial staff and service providers.

Communities can be designed to promote safety and connection with neighbours. As part of the partnership with Province, HRM will provide community design support for the tiny homes pilot and pallet shelter villages to promote safety for residents and the surrounding community and community connectivity.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Designated locations require weekly garbage service and water delivery. These costs can exceed \$30,000/year for a large encampment location. The increased distribution of homeless encampments throughout the municipality will increase these costs. Adding power requires an investment of \$50,000 - \$100,000 and ongoing utility costs. With the increased time required to do the regular serving of parks and anticipated revenue loss, there is also increased pressure on Parks & Recreation's budget.

HRM has agreed to be a partner in the temporary housing and tiny homes pilot projects. The Province is going to invest \$16.9 million to purchase the pallet shelters, as well as construct the tiny homes. They will then provide almost \$1 million/year to provide support to the tiny homes pilot. In addition, there will be further funding to provide support to the various temporary housing villages.

HRM has agreed to provide the surplus ball field on Cobequid Road as a site for the tiny homes pilot and general site maintenance services such as snow clearing and grounds care. The 100 pallet shelters will be distributed to various sites throughout HRM, some on HRM land and some on Provincial land. HRM will help prepare the sites for the installation of the pallet shelters, as well as provide maintenance services such as snow clearing and grounds care.

As part of this overall partnership with the Province, HRM has also agreed to facilitate the intake and selection process for people moving into the Pallet Shelters and the Tiny Homes. While each site will have a service provider, HRM will ensure that suitable sleeping rough candidates are prioritized for housing. This will also provide a consistent link between the many service providers supporting residents in various

locations so that people are effectively supported and housed.

A full-time housing coordinator position will cost approximately \$110,000 annually, including salary and benefits. As this position would be filled for only part of this fiscal year, costs for 2023 – 2024 would not exceed \$33,000. The costs for 2024 – 2025 will be included in the upcoming Community Safety budget presentation.

It is impossible at this time to estimate the exact costs of supporting temporary housing villages or tiny homes communities. The scope of our commitments, as determined by potential future negotiations with the Province of Nova Scotia, will determine these costs. Staff will return to Regional Council at a future date with more information.

Should the municipality be forced to designate a recreation facility space for use as a winter homelessness shelter, there will be significant impacts on Parks & Recreation revenues and significant costs and disruption borne by volunteers, community groups, and businesses.

RISK CONSIDERATION

HRM must prioritize housing for people who are sleeping rough. With HRM staff providing a leadership role in the selection process for the various housing opportunities created for these Provincial initiatives, the municipality will be able to ensure that as many people as possible sleeping outdoors in parks and other similar spaces can be housed quickly and effectively. HRM choosing not to support this process could result in all these units being used for people who, while homeless, may not be sleeping rough.

If the municipality must close a recreation facility to create space for a winter shelter, there will be large revenue losses in the 2023 – 2024 fiscal year, as well as a loss of confidence in HRM as a facility lessor. Revenue losses will likely extend into future years as some potential renters will now look to other spaces to host their events.

If a winter shelter is not provided to persons sleeping rough, there will be dramatically elevated levels of human suffering. It is also highly probable that some people will die due to the severe weather.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

Homeless encampments do not have features such as storage for personal belongings, running water, a consistent and safe form of heating and cooling, places to prepare and store food, and indoor hygiene facilities, so they produce considerable waste. Additionally, most encampments are set up on grounds that are not suitably prepared for this type of long-term habitation. As such, encampments need extensive cleaning and maintenance support, and once housing is provided to those living there, the site requires extensive remediation to return it to its original purpose. It is also important to note that waste does not just impact municipal properties. Private businesses and property owners are impacted by waste and often have to address it themselves at their own cost.

The creation of pallet shelter villages and a tiny homes community will include site modifications to support their installation. These will require consultation with planning and development staff to ensure the impacts of these installations on the environment and community are minimized and appropriately mitigated.

ALTERNATIVES

Halifax Regional Council may:

1. Not support the hiring of a Housing Coordinator to support operation and intake for the temporary housing initiative and tiny homes pilot.
2. Direct the CAO not to permit an HRM space to be utilized as a winter shelter if the Province cannot provide one. HRM could consider, as an alternative to a winter shelter, providing people with survival gear, supplies, and equipment suitable for prolonged periods in subzero temperatures, including additional heating and cooking tools.
3. Not endorse the approaches outlined in this report and direct the CAO to return to Regional Council with alternate approaches to address the housing and homelessness crisis.

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.

Report Approved by: Bill Moore, Executive Director, Community Safety 902.943.0207

Report Prepared by: Max Chauvin, Director of Housing and Homelessness, Community Safety 902.456.7420
