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The economics of urban prosperity

By Tom Mason
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Urban sprawl is one of the worst byproducts of our modern age. The need for cities to spread outward gobbles up forests and farmlands, chokes our air with commuter traffic pollution and forces municipalities to spend heavily on expensive infrastructure.

For a growing city like the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM), there is only one alternative to the phenomenon of urban sprawl, according to economist and Greater Halifax Partnership senior vice president Fred Morley — density.

Simply put, density is a lot cheaper than sprawl, says Morley. People who live in the downtown areas and suburban centres can walk to restaurants, theatres, shops and work, cutting down drastically on fossil fuel consumption. Sewer lines and roads already exist, requiring no large cash outlays up front.

"Urban sprawl has a fairly large cost associated with it," says Morley. "If you're developing properties in greenfield areas, you have to worry about things like new streets, sewer and water lines, and in some areas, on-site septic and water. You have to provide things like garbage collection, snow removal and street maintenance in addition to other services like police and fire protection, schools, parks and recreation services."

In parts of the municipality that have high density, most of those services are already provided, says Morley. Buildings that locate downtown cost the municipality little in infrastructure money but pay back huge dividends in tax dollars.

"A development like United Gulf will pay about \$3.5 million in taxes every year," says Morley, referring to the 27-storey twin tower development that was recently approved by HRM council. "You'd have to build 1500 to 2000 new homes to generate that kind of tax revenue. And if you did build that many



Joseph Robichaud Photography

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homes, you'd get your three million in taxes but in the end it might cost you far more to service the properties."

Density has other cost benefits as well, says Morley. City streets that become empty, deserted canyons after 5:00 p.m. are a blight on cities and make them unattractive to visitors and tourists. If the downtown core is full of residents who live there 24 hours a day, cities come alive. They become a great place to live, play and work.

As a long-time developer and the president of East Port Properties, John Lindsay knows first hand the pressures that developers in HRM face. "We think about development a lot in Halifax," he says. "It's been a live issue since the 1960s."

Two developments in particular sparked the debate, according to Lindsay — the massive Scotia Square development that resulted in the destruction of a large chunk of the city's historic

downtown core, and the Fenwick Towers complex that Lindsay calls "Halifax's iconic evil development."

"Those two developments generated enough ill-will to last two generations," he says.

Lindsay says European cities, with their low buildings and ornate architecture, are often held up as the perfect model for what Halifax should be. "What is missed is the fact that these cities are incredibly dense," says Lind-

say. "There are no backyards, there are no open areas. Every space is used, seven stories tall. If we are going to achieve that same kind of density in Halifax with our backyards and green spaces, we are going to have to build a lot taller than seven stories."

Lindsay is a supporter of Halifax's view planes legislation and says it has helped to shape the city in a positive way. "But you have to allow density to occur where it is allowed by the view planes," he says.

"Density is green. It is what makes a city function economically with the fewest resources. Density has less impact on the environment. The issue we need to solve is how to make density less oppressive for the people who live here."

Jim Donovan is project manager for the economic strategy for the Halifax Regional Municipality. He says that appropriately planned urban development is vital if HRM is to continue to grow and prosper.

"I think the great untapped potential of HRM is that we're a city of cities. We're a city of rural areas and wilderness, a city of rugged coastline — all things that weren't anticipated when the word 'city' was first imagined. We need to combine that with a high level of quality urban development that promotes us on the world stage and identifies us as a progressive, vibrant, creative place. That's what's going to attract new investment to HRM."

The downtown core also needs to attract more people who want to live in it. Landmark projects like Bishop's Landing are a good start, says Donovan. "The people who live downtown add vibrancy and life to the city," he says.

"But it also makes good economic sense to attract residents to downtown. After all, the streets and sewer lines are already there. We don't need to build them from scratch. It's low-cost development."

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