

Fred Morley, Executive VP and Chief Economist, Greater Halifax Partnership

Key Messages: HRMbyDesign – Bill 181

As the Vice-President and Chief Economist
Of the Greater Halifax Partnership,
I'm here to show our support
For Bill 181 HRMbyDesign.
We believe HRM by design
Represents common ground
Between extreme views
On the future of our community.

HRMbyDesign will create
A clear, predictable and timely
development approval process
For downtown Halifax.

The existing process is lengthy
And can be frustrating for developers, citizens and staff.
Over 70 competing, and sometimes conflicting policies
Must be interpreted
To assess development applications.

Even when approved by

Major development applications almost always are appealed on the basis of misinterpretation of these policies. We need a better process. Bill 181 will give us one.

Site Plan Approval has been proposed as the best option for the new development approvals approach in downtown Halifax. The tool is already enabled under the MGA, and has been in use in downtown Dartmouth since 2000. Enhancements to this tool to increase public participation and transparency are being recommended by HRMbyDesign, including:

- Site plan approval as currently enabled through the MGA delegates decision-making authority to the Development Officer, a municipal staff member. **Under Bill 181, HRMbyDesign has requested that Council have the ability to appoint a citizen-based Design Review Committee to make decisions on substantial development applications.**
- Currently site plan approval does not allow for the consideration of the “external appearance of structures”, or design of buildings. Our Growth Attitudes Survey shows that over 90% of people in HRM think that visual appeal should be considered in the approval process. Almost three quarters of residents feel that design is more important than height. **HRMbyDesign has requested legislative**

amendments that will allow the external appearance of structures to be considered when using site plan approval in development approvals. Proposed developments will be required to meet the guidelines in the Design Manual that will be implemented by the Design Review Committee and Development Officer in the case of non-substantial applications.

The **appeals process** will also be streamlined by using site plan approval instead of development agreements. Currently the Utility and Review Board reviews appeals of development agreements, which can be a costly and time-consuming process. By using site plan, appeals of approved or rejected applications will be heard and decided on by **Regional Council, in the format of a public hearing. Appeals by Council must be heard within 60 days of the appeal being filed.**

HRM currently engages in one of the most intense public participation processes for approving development across Canada. This process was never intended to be used long term...the existing Municipal Planning Strategy and Land Use By-law were created as an interim measure until a detailed Secondary Plan could be written. That is what HRMbyDesign provides.

It is time to stop discussing these proposals on an **application-by-application** basis. The point of HRMbyDesign is to streamline development approvals so that we can encourage a positive climate of development to help revitalize the downtown. A healthy and vibrant downtown means a healthy and vibrant municipality and province. Let me share a note that I received recently that is reflective of the challenges for Development in Nova Scotia.

“Hi Fred:

We are involved in Development Projects around Atlantic Canada doing business case analysis on them bringing strategic partnerships and the like. I must say that working in HRM is by far and I mean far the toughest municipality to develop. ... timing for approvals on average I would say is about 3 times as long as most if not all the others. We have one project where our unit costs have doubled... after 18 months of approval process. I am not mentioning this to complain about any specific project. Just to share with you as the promoter of Economic Development that something really needs to be done to simplify the process, shorten the time frames, respect the cost of delay. HRM is a great city but it is generally felt that it is a very tough place to do business. Hope you don't mind my sharing that with you.”

In a time of global **economic uncertainty**, we should all recognize the importance of establishing a strong vision for the future development and growth of our region. That's what HRMbyDesign's plan for downtown is: a strategic and balanced approach to development that will help us foster economic growth and investment, while connecting our rich past with a bright future.

There is **strong public support** for this project, following intense and community-led public consultation on this plan over the past 16 months. A survey conducted on behalf of the Greater Halifax Partnership in early 2008 determined that the majority of residents believe the design of a building is more important than its height and 80% of those aware or somewhat aware of HRMbyDesign are in support of its objectives.

HRM needs this proposed legislation in order to consider the Plan for downtown in its entirety. This legislation does not approve the HRMbyDesign Plan for downtown Halifax. It only enables key elements of the proposed new development approvals process. The entire Plan will be vetted by Council and the public through a public hearing process in 2009.

Our community needs growth. We have many of the elements in place for growth to occur. We have a regional plan and an economic strategy. We have HRM by design waiting for approval. On the business end of growth we have companies who want to bring high wage jobs to Halifax but they need new office space and not just any office space, class A preferably 20,000 sq ft floor plates.

Our economic strategy suggests that we need an environment that will propel a fast-paced knowledge economy that creates enviable, high-wage jobs in fast growing sectors while maintaining the aspects of our history, culture, civility and quality of place that make us distinct, that make us who we are. It's why we have pressed for more progressive tax treatment of heritage properties, why we welcome HRMByDesign's recommendations for heritage districts.

HRM By Design represents an important compromise between develop and all cost and no change. Preserving heritage requires a balance between development and preservation. We need to bring density back to the down town. A vibrant down town will ensure the preservation of the best of our past. Walt Disney said that "change is inevitable, but growth is optional. Without the vibrancy in our down town that growth brings Halifax will lose our heritage as decaying buildings turn into vacant lots. We have too many of those already. We will become a city with no future and increasingly no past.

We have a plan to go forward. We need your help.

With this in mind, and on behalf of the Greater Halifax Partnership, I urge you to support Bill 181 HRMbyDesign.