


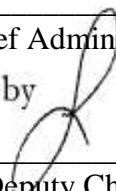
**Item No. 11.1.10**  
**Halifax Regional Council**  
**January 14, 2014**

**TO:** Mayor Savage and Members of Halifax Regional Council

Original signed by 

**SUBMITTED BY:**

Richard Butts, Chief Administrative Officer

Original Signed by 

Mike Labrecque, Deputy Chief Administrative Officer

**DATE:** December 16, 2013

**SUBJECT:** School Review Process – Phase 2

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### **ORIGIN**

July 30, 2013 motion:

Moved by Councillor Watts, seconded by Councillor Nicoll that Halifax Regional Council approve HRM participation in the School Review Process by having the Mayor send a letter on behalf of Regional Council, outlining the mutual interest HRM and the HRSB has in community planning and regional plan growth targets, as well as our interactions related to funding, a multi-year capital planning process and surplus school disposal.

November 26, 2013 release of the NS Department of Education discussion paper on the school review process.

### **LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY**

HRM Charter, including sections 2 (purpose), 61 (powers of the municipality regarding property), 75(1) (agreements for the provision of a service or a capital facility), 80 and 81 (supplementary funding), and Part VIII (Planning & Development).

### **RECOMMENDATION**

It is recommended that Halifax Regional Council provide a submission to the NS Department of Education for Phase 2 of the school review process, as outlined in the discussion section of this report.

## **BACKGROUND**

The NS Department of Education initiated a review of the school review process in spring 2013, in response to growing concerns about the fairness and effectiveness of the ways schools are selected, assessed and chosen for closure. The review focuses on the process used to review schools in the public education system, ensuring attention is paid to the value of the school to students, school boards, community, and the local economy. As Phase 1 of the review, the Province solicited submissions over the summer and brought together a committee to compile the results and make recommendations for broader public consultation to take place in winter 2014.

Council approved a motion on July 30, 2013, approving HRM participation in the School Review Process. A submission was sent to the NS Department of Education outlining the mutual interest HRM and the HRSB have in community planning and regional plan growth targets, as well as interactions related to funding, a multi-year capital planning process and surplus school disposal.

The results of the Phase 1 consultation were compiled and broad themes identified in a discussion paper released in November 2013. The discussion paper does not make recommendations or set direction, but rather summarizes the major themes in submissions received, and sets out some options for consideration. It is meant to help guide public consultations being planned for January 2014, which will focus on the following seven themes:

- 1) Long range planning – the future of a school is part of a plan for the broader region.
- 2) Clear consistent indicators to identify schools for review – school boards use clear, consistent criteria to identify schools for review, and the public understands why and how a school has been chosen.
- 3) Better supporting information – clear, rigorous and trusted information is available to help boards and communities make effective decisions.
- 4) More flexibility in the process – more flexible timing and accommodations for unique circumstances, while maintaining administrative fairness.
- 5) Decision-making authority – consider the optimum arrangement/decision-making body.
- 6) Innovative roles for schools – boards consider ways to keep a school program in the community when it is in the best interests of the students and community.
- 7) Responsibility for former school sites – levels of government work together to minimize cost burdens when a school closes, and decisions focus on the best option for delivering education rather than who pays when a school site closes.

## **DISCUSSION**

There are a number of areas where decisions related to school construction, location and closure impact HRM operations and strategic planning. These were raised in HRM's submission to the Department of Education, and are described in greater detail below. Yet under the Education Act municipalities have no mandated role in school reviews, and school boards are not required to consult with municipalities during the review process. There is also no regular mechanism for communication between HRM and the HRSB. This can lead to situations where HRM is not

aware of decisions related to schools that impact infrastructure and transportation needs in the community, until after the fact. Enhanced communication between the two organizations would allow HRM to proactively plan for anticipated changes to school communities. A working group with staff membership from HRM and the HRSB would act as a forum for both parties to share information on issues that impact residents. The NS Department of Education would also have a place in such a working group, given its role in facilitating new school construction.

The issues outlined below demonstrate the important role schools play in the community, in addition to their primary function as a place of education. The discussion paper released by the Province takes a holistic view of the entire school review process and provides an opportunity for HRM's issues to be addressed. The items build on the issues raised in HRM's original submission and would form the content of the phase 2 submission.

### Population Projections & Density

HRM's population is growing. Encouraging density in already-built-up areas allows us to tap into existing infrastructure, rather than building communities on the outskirts which require new services and infrastructure. This is true for the school board as much as it is for HRM. HRM's Regional Plan sets out goals for population development that would manage growth in a cost-effective and sustainable way: 25% growth in the Regional Centre, 50% in the suburbs, and 25% in rural areas of HRM.

Aligning the population targets in HRSB's strategic plan and HRM's Regional Plan would allow both parties to use infrastructure already in place, thereby minimizing costs. School boards have a key role to play in settlement patterns as people look for homes in areas close to schools for both educational and recreational opportunities. There is a desire on HRM's part to keep schools in the urban core open to help attract more families. This would also support the economic strategy goal of building a vibrant and attractive Regional Centre with the aim of attracting 8,000 more residents by 2016.

School boards are not currently required to involve the public in long-range facilities planning. Involving municipalities, communities and other stakeholders earlier in the process for long-range capital planning (i.e., before the plan is presented at a school board meeting), will better align region-wide long-range planning. A regional review would examine how school boards can best deliver education across an entire region. Rather than looking at each individual school on a case-by-case basis, a longer-term plan for the community could be developed in tandem with HRM's planning processes (e.g., the Centre Plan). This would give families greater certainty about the future of their neighbourhood schools. It is important that capital planning consider not only schools slated for closure and new builds, but the impact on all schools in the area, as growth impacts the capacity of existing amenities.

### Transportation

Transportation is another issue which has arisen since HRM sent its first submission. Access to nearby schools is a point of concern for many families. Both HRM and the HRSB hear from families concerned about increasing walking distances for children as well as the safety of the

roads they must use. Changes to school boundaries in some areas have altered the routes children take to get to school, raising concerns that they are walking along busier roads. This can cause pressure for additional sidewalks and crosswalks to be built to improve safety for students going to and from school. Stronger communication and aligned capital planning would allow HRM and HRSB to work together proactively to ensure adequate measures are in place that address safety concerns.

### Community Usage

Schools provide a major source of community facilities across the Municipality. HRM and HRSB currently partner on facilities to ensure community access to gyms, theatres, etc, after school hours. However as schools close, communities lose their gymnasiums and available space. Any school review process must take into consideration the impact of the school closure on the broader community.

Having schools support a range of community services is a concept worth exploring. HRM currently has joint use agreements with the HRSB allowing for community use of school buildings, and there is a growing trend towards incorporating community space in new high schools (e.g., Spatz Theatre in Citadel High, Bella Rose Theatre in Halifax West). The terms “hub school” and “wrap-around” school are used to describe a variety of scenarios for using schools buildings in different ways or for housing schools in non-traditional buildings. Joint recreation asset planning and access would enhance both school and community amenities in a cost effective manner.

Aligned capital planning would allow municipalities and school boards to identify where costs might be shared and a better return on investment realized. The partners could ideally create a 15-20 year capital construction and renewal plan. This process would allow for alignment of school review and renewal process with development planning and population trends, and ensure least cost for all partners when considering recreation centres, wrap around schools with other provincial and/or municipal services, comfort centres for emergency response, and all the other services that are delivered or attached to school sites.

### Financial Impact

School disposal has a budgetary impact on HRM, as all schools constructed before 1982 revert to the municipality upon closure. This represents the majority of schools in Nova Scotia. There are both benefits and costs to this arrangement. Through UNSM, municipalities have raised concerns about the costs involved in taking over surplus schools. Maintenance and renovations may be needed to update the building or repurpose it for another use, and demolition costs may exceed the amount received by selling the land.

The Provincial discussion paper states that the cost of building disposition should not influence discussions on how to best meet educational needs. However, changes to the school review process have the potential to impact school board budgets. To that end, the paper recommends more discussion on how levels of government can work together to minimize the cost burden when a school closes.

It is worth noting that not only do municipalities face a financial responsibility in taking ownership of surplus schools, but they also make annual mandatory contributions to the Province to support education. In 2012-13 HRM paid \$112 million in mandatory education contributions to the Province. As a further indicator of the commitment of the HRM to education, HRM contributed a further \$18 million to school boards within the municipality. Any discussion about cost implications of surplus schools should include consideration of all municipal fiscal responsibilities in regards to education. As funding partners for the school system, municipalities must have input into the final process developed through this review. During the election campaign the Liberal leader indicated a willingness to revisit the MOU that would have phased out these contributions (implemented in 2007 and cancelled in 2011). Currently, the mandatory education rate is fixed, so the amount grows with the growth in assessment. For 2013-14, mandatory education costs grew by \$7.7 million, or 7.2%, over double the rate of growth for municipal expenditures.

#### Next Steps

The Department of Education has set a deadline of January 24 for submissions to the second phase of the school review. They have also set dates for public consultation sessions. Dates in HRM are January 21 at Dartmouth High, and January 22 at Ecole secondaire du Sommet. After public consultation finishes the Review Committee will consider the information received and develop recommendations for the Minister of Education. Review Committee membership consists of staff from the provincial departments of Education, Transportation & Infrastructure, Economic & Rural Development & Tourism, Service Nova Scotia & Municipal relations, as well as UNSM and a school board representative.

It is recommended that HRM send a submission based on the information in this report, and include the recommendation that a staff working group be established between HRM, the HRSB and the NS Department of Education to ensure more aligned planning.

#### **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

None.

#### **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

Issues raised in this report include points raised by residents to both staff and Councillors.

#### **ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS**

N/a

#### **ALTERNATIVES**

Council could choose not to send a follow-up submission. This is not recommended because

many of Council's original points are raised in the provincial discussion paper, and this is an opportunity to expand upon them.

**ATTACHMENTS**

None.

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A copy of this report can be obtained online at <http://www.halifax.ca/council/agendasc/cagenda.html> then choose the appropriate meeting date, or by contacting the Office of the Municipal Clerk at 490-4210, or Fax 490-4208.

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