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**Environment and Sustainability Standing Committee
December 1, 2011**

TO: Chair and Members of Environment and Sustainability Standing Committee

SUBMITTED BY: 
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DATE: November 4, 2011

SUBJECT: Open Space Functional Plan – Scope and Process

INFORMATION REPORT

ORIGIN

- Policy E19 under the HRM Regional Municipal Planning Strategy:
“HRM shall prepare an Open Space Functional Plan to determine an economically and environmentally sustainable strategy for the equitable maintenance and distribution of parks and open space throughout the Municipality.”
- 2011-2012 Business Plan and Capital budget, Real Property Planning, Planning & Infrastructure

BACKGROUND

The Open Space Functional Plan (Open Space Plan) is a deliverable under the HRM Regional Municipal Planning Strategy (Regional Plan). The goal of a functional plan is to provide more detailed objectives, actions and implementation strategies to develop and manage municipal programs, services, infrastructure and projects. The Open Space Plan will establish a strategy and implementation framework for developing and managing an interconnected network of open space resources across the Region and within communities.

The Regional Plan defines open space broadly as “publically or privately owned, undeveloped land or water intended to be preserved for agricultural, forest, community form, ecological, historical, public safety or recreational purposes”.¹ A system of physically connected natural areas, parks, trails and corridors is emphasized to protect biodiversity, environmental systems and recreational function.²

The Open Space Plan will help answer important questions to guide decision-making including:

What are the core principles and values for public open space? What are the opportunities and constraints within the network and within neighbourhoods? What policy directions and guidelines will shape decision-making? What are the priority actions and recommendations?

DISCUSSION

Network Approach:

The open space plan will go beyond conventional parks planning to focus on an interconnected network of open space resources including natural spaces (land and water), park lands, trails and corridors (linear parks), special views and image routes, and streets and roads providing active transportation pathways. Regionally, this translates into a mosaic of open space patches (parks), network (streets and waterways), belts (trails and corridors), and “green” wedges (natural areas) that are physically connected and operating as a system (Attachment 1). The same approach is applied locally to geographical districts and neighbourhoods where parks and natural areas are woven together by linear trails and street network. The system as a whole provides recreational, environmental, transportation and community identity benefits that translate into economic and social development value for the Municipality.

¹ HRM Regional Municipal Planning Strategy, June 2006, pg. 29

² *ibid*

Objectives:

Functional plans are meant to provide more focused policy direction and an implementation framework for developing and managing municipal programs, services and infrastructure. Toward this outcome, the Open Space Plan will establish public values, priorities and actions for developing, protecting and managing HRM's open space network.

The plan will include (but not be limited to) the following objectives:

1. Identify natural and urban corridor linkages and community networks to guide future development patterns and protect environmentally vulnerable lands and habitat;
2. Improve existing open spaces and invest in new assets where deficiencies or gaps exist;
3. Explore opportunities to develop and promote underutilized open spaces;
4. Build accessible parks and linear networks to address evolving community needs and demographic and development trends, including the needs of children, youth and seniors;
5. Proactively respond to developing communities and development projects by planning for an adequate amount, quality and character of open space;
6. Establish an interconnected regional trails and linear parks network, including water routes and land-based trails;
7. Establish a strategy for the retention of coastal and lake access and protection of watercourse buffers;
8. Establish selection criteria and acquisition guidelines for investing in new open space;
9. Establish sustainable natural open space and regional park management strategies; and
10. Adopt policy direction to address competing demands for open space lands and the protection of public parks.

Corporate Alignment:

The Open Space Plan will address areas where strategic and operational alignments can be made and where benefits can be maximized with respect to the distribution, function and quality of open space regionally and locally.

The Open Space Plan will address the following Council Focus Areas:

Transportation:

The Plan will consider how transportation infrastructure can be maximized to build a more connected open space network including quality pedestrian pathways and spaces that support transit and cycling objectives. Key alignments will be made with HRM's Active Transportation Plan, Transit Plan and Roadway Functional Plan to identify priority actions and opportunities for stronger coordination.

Infrastructure:

Council is focused on building community facilities and infrastructure that supports healthy, safe and vibrant communities. The Open Space Plan will consider how public facilities can be integrated into the open space network by providing key connections. Enhancements to the regional, community and local parks system will be identified to ensure diverse population and

neighbourhood needs are being met. Alignments will be made with the HRM Community Facilities Master Plan, strategies addressing outdoor recreation facilities and the Cultural Plan.

Community Planning:

Sustainable development is a focus for HRM including investment in walk-able, transit-oriented neighbourhoods, protection of natural areas, storm-water management and heritage conservation. The Open Space Plan will maintain these objectives by emphasising relationships between elements including how development policies and standards affect open space use and network function or how urban trees manage storm-water. Policy and program alignments with community plans and land-use by-laws will be important.

Municipal policies, plans and projects respecting land-use planning, transportation, public facility development and asset management, have a significant impact on how open space is distributed, how it is used and how it functions as a system. Competing demands for the development of public infrastructure can also place pressure on open space resources. This can affect the overall quality and connectivity of the open space network. Better aligned policy directions and decision-making guidelines will be recommended to help balance Municipal prosperity objectives.

Phased Planning:

A phased approach will be used to develop the Open Space Plan beginning with the Regional Centre during the fall and winter of 2011. Attempts will be made to align the planning process with the development of the Regional Centre Community Plan and Land-Use By-Law (depending on scheduled start-up for that initiative). Open space planning for the suburban and rural communities will begin in the spring of 2012. The entire HRM Open Space Functional Plan, consisting of three volumes, will be completed by the spring of 2013.

The proposed timeline will allow for coordination with the upcoming review of the Regional Plan, including public engagement initiatives which might be organized jointly. Alignment could also be achieved through a joint Steering Committee for the Open Space Plan and the Regional Centre Plan, recognizing that there are common objectives between the two plans.

Regional Centre Priority:

Council has initiated a series of planning initiatives, projects and investments that focus on the revitalization of the Regional Centre. In order to maximize efficiencies and align with corporate priorities, the open space plan will focus first on the Regional Centre. There will also be an opportunity to coordinate with other functional plans that are underway or proposed, including storm-water management, urban forest, heritage, and the opportunity sites functional plan.

While a regional, network approach to open space planning will form the foundation for all phases (urban, suburban, and rural), the regional centre open space plan will address issues that are unique and relevant to the urban environment. This will include issues that are related to

building compact, transit-oriented communities, building multi-functional public spaces, conserving and utilizing a limited land base, and building higher density neighbourhoods to fit a diversity of family structures and lifestyles. Open Space programmed and designed for active and passive recreation, neighbourhood character, natural respite, and active transportation is particularly relevant to the urban context. The protection of significant views and cultural and historical resources is also important regionally and at the urban scale.

BUDGET IMPLICATIONS

There are no budget implications at this time. The development of the Open Space Functional Plan is allocated for under the 2011–2012 capital budget CDE 00105, Reservation # 1988.1.

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT POLICIES / BUSINESS PLAN

This report complies with the Municipality's Multi-Year Financial Strategy, the approved Operating, Project and Reserve budgets, policies and procedures regarding withdrawals from the utilization of Project and Operating reserves, as well as any relevant legislation.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Public engagement through communication and active participation in the planning process is essential to a successful outcome. For public engagement to be effective, people must be aware of what's happening, why it's being done, and how they can contribute. In order to enhance community input, an engagement process will be designed that goes above and beyond the public meeting.

A portion of the project budget has been allocated to augment the public engagement process by focusing on methods such as design charrettes, focus groups with children, youth and seniors, community walks, social media, and creative promotion.

There are some potential communication issues that have been identified including:

1. Confusion within the public where multiple (and related) planning initiatives are being advanced simultaneously, i.e. open space plan, urban forest master plan, regional centre plan, and the regional plan review;
2. Community sensitivities regarding the phasing of urban, suburban and rural plans;
3. The ability to effectively engage and interest diverse communities in the planning process; and
4. Ensuring an adequate and consistent level of communication resources for the project.

These risks are manageable and will be addressed as the planning process unfolds.

ALTERNATIVES

Council can choose to take a different planning approach for the development of the Open Space Functional Plan. However, focusing on an overall open space network and systems approach alignments with other policies and corporate priorities can be maximized. Furthermore, a healthy open space network is one of the best mechanisms to achieve HRM's environmental sustainability and economic development objectives.

The phased method of planning could also be approached differently by undertaking one broad open space plan for the region. However, a phased (volume) approach allows for more understanding, analysis and solution-seeking strategies for addressing the unique qualities and issues that face urban, suburban and rural communities.

ATTACHMENTS

ATTACHMENT 1 Open Space Network Patterns

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

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ATTACHMENT 1 OPEN SPACE NETWORK PATTERN

Figure 1: patterns in green urban spaces

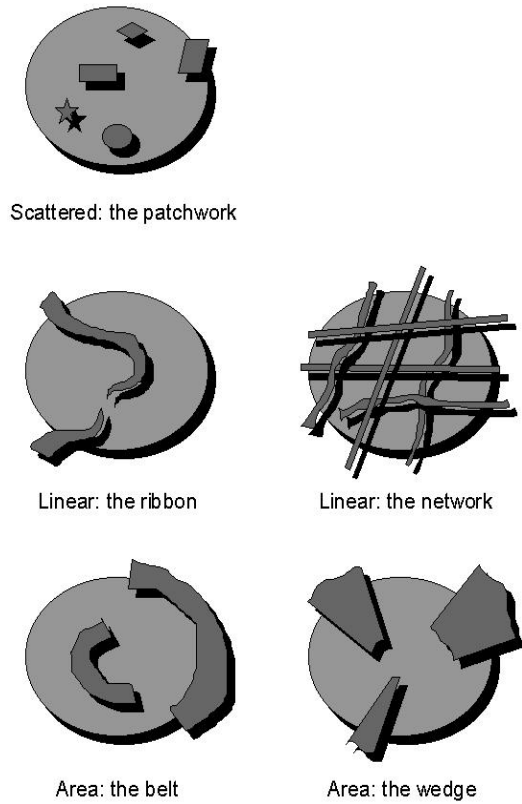
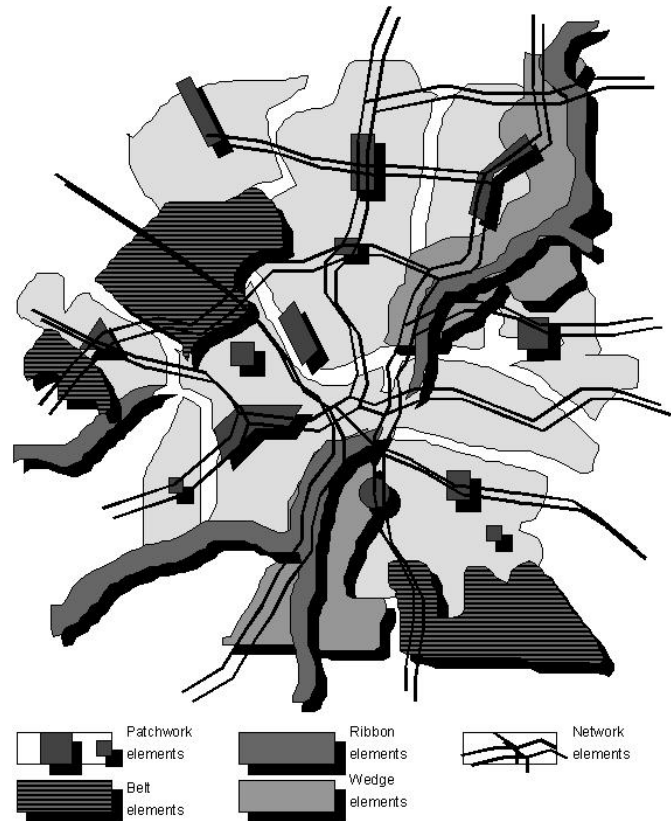


Figure 3: The city of Eindhoven as an example



Löörzing, H. (1998). Design of urban open spaces: Bringing a piece of landscape into the city.

Proceedings of the European Council of Landscape Architecture Schools Conference, Vienna, Austria.