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REGIONAL PLAN REVIEW ISSUE PAPER

SUBURBAN COMMUNITY DESIGN

HALIFAX

May 2021

INTRODUCTION

The Regional Plan sets out planning policy and regulations for three major geographic areas of the region – the Regional Centre, Suburban Communities and Rural Communities. Suburban communities are those areas outside the Regional Centre and within the Urban Transit Service Boundary, generally serviced by municipal water and wastewater. The suburban area includes both long-standing communities and new communities that have been built in recent years to accommodate HRM's growing population.

Many of the community plans (called Secondary Municipal Planning Strategies) were completed before amalgamation and may no longer reflect

the communities' visions. The Regional Plan and the Halifax Green Network Plan have also focused on stronger protections for the natural environment, and the Integrated Mobility Plan has directed us to focus more growth where residents can easily walk, wheel, cycle or take public transit. Updated regulations are needed to ensure these policies are implemented.

As part of the Secondary Plan & By-Law Simplification Program, the Municipality will be developing a “Suburban Plan” that will provide new planning policy and land use by-law regulations for the suburban area. This will be developed with significant public engagement and will provide new direction for how suburban

areas will grow and develop.

In the meantime, development is continuing to take place in suburban communities under the existing secondary municipal planning strategies or through plan amendments. In an effort to provide some guidance for the evaluation of development in the suburban area and to provide early direction for the Suburban Planning framework, policy guidance will be developed for suburban communities and incorporated into the Regional Plan as part of the Regional Plan Review. This document provides an initial overview of some key ideas that may help to guide this work.



GROWTH IN SUBURBAN NEIGHBOURHOODS

HRM is growing rapidly and the Regional Plan currently directs at least 75% of new development to the Regional Centre and suburban communities. This means that our existing suburban communities will need to continue to change to accommodate additional housing options. Planning policy that directs the location, density and form of new development in suburban communities will be developed through the Suburban Plan process. In the meantime, priorities plans, like the Integrated Mobility Plan and the Halifax Green Network Plan, have provided direction that should be considered when decisions are being made to locate growth in suburban areas. Objectives for growth in suburban neighbourhoods include:

Intensifying Growth Centres

The Regional Plan identifies “growth centres” in suburban communities that are appropriate areas for additional development and residential growth. These areas will be reviewed based on the location of services like infrastructure, transit, facilities and other public amenities. This will allow for services to be provided efficiently and ensure that residents live in places where it is easy to take transit, walk, roll or cycle to get to work, school, shopping, and more.

Encouraging Transit Oriented Development

The Integrated Mobility Plan recommends that high-density residential and employment development only be located where there is an existing or proposed high level of transit service. The Rapid Transit Strategy further identifies a high-frequency Bus Rapid Transit Network that provides an outline of where these services will be located in suburban communities. By directing development to the areas identified in this network, more residents will live in neighbourhoods with convenient access to services and employment by transit. This will help to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, reduce travel times and support investment in transit infrastructure. Transit-oriented development encourages mixed-use development, compact blocks and more dense built form within a walkable distance of transit to provide a range of services, amenities and residential options.



Introducing Gentle Infill Development

While “intensification” can seem intimidating in suburban neighbourhoods that are generally characterized by lower density housing (such as single and semi-detached houses), infill development in established neighbourhoods can allow more residents to live in these well-serviced areas, without negatively impacting their character. Gentle density allows for more housing options to be provided in buildings of a similar scale to surrounding development in terms of their height and massing. In planning, this is often referred to as “missing middle” housing (for more information, visit missingmiddlehousing.com).



Protecting Natural Areas

Significant environmental lands, such as wildlife corridors, wetlands and forests, support a healthy environment and provide important ecological functions. These lands enhance climate resiliency, sequester carbon, increase biodiversity, maintain water quality and more. They can also support healthy communities by providing access to nature and opportunities for recreation. The Halifax Green Network Plan provided recommendations regarding the protection of these areas that should be considered when identifying locations for development in suburban areas.



Creating Complete Communities

While the focus of new development is proposed to be on growth centres and transit corridors, all communities should provide a range of housing options, services, local commercial uses, parks, community facilities and other amenities. Residents of all communities deserve a high quality of life with the things they need to be healthy and happy and spend less time travelling.



COMMUNITY PLACEMAKING

The urban environment affects the way we live, work, and travel. Urban design, which is the process of designing and shaping the physical features of cities and communities, can create places that invite residents to participate in community life, celebrate culture, protect the environment and support economic growth. Fundamentally it is about creating places for people. Objectives for community design in suburban areas include:

Prioritizing Pedestrians

Suburban communities should be inviting to pedestrians and create comfortable environments for walking and rolling. The design of properties and buildings can support these goals. Buildings should be located to face streets and public pathways, and active uses, like stores, should be located on the ground floor of larger buildings to invite interactions between pedestrians, businesses and residents. Parking areas should be buffered from roads and pathways and provide direct connections to buildings and streets.



Creating Welcoming Open Spaces

Open spaces can help strengthen community identity and provide opportunities for social and physical activities. Public open spaces, like parks, plazas and recreation fields should be strategically planned and located to be available to meet the needs of communities. These open spaces should be designed to be comfortable for use by all residents and visitors, including those using mobility devices. They should be designed at a “human scale”, which means that their amenities, materials and overall design encourages social interaction and provides protection from varying weather conditions.



Celebrating Culture and Heritage

As suburban communities change and grow, their unique histories and culture should be maintained and celebrated. The [Sharing Our Stories - Culture & Heritage Priorities Plan](#) will provide recommendations for how communities can better support culture, arts and heritage with specific attention to celebrating under-represented communities. These may include the protection of heritage resources like heritage properties, heritage conservation districts and landscapes of cultural significance, as well as the provision of amenities like public art, gathering spaces and facilities.



SITE CONTEXT AND DESIGN

Site context refers to how a property relates to the surrounding neighbourhood and larger region. This may include a site's interaction with road, transit, park and natural systems, as well as community character, culture and history. Components of a site such as open spaces, pathways, accesses, and building orientation should consider the site's relationship with the surrounding neighbourhood. Objectives for development in suburban areas related to site context and design include:

Relating to Surrounding Context

New development should be designed to transition to the existing surrounding neighbourhood. This means that the building massing, scale, height and design relates to surrounding buildings and fits in with the community's character. Parks, natural spaces, and historic resources should also be considered. Contextual design can enhance a neighbourhood's character by maintaining existing development patterns and design choices.

Enhancing Adjacent and Nearby Open Space

New open spaces created on private properties as part of a new development can enhance adjacent or nearby open space by providing direct connections to public paths and sidewalks, and by complementing the design and aesthetic of these spaces. Plazas, squares and parks that are being considered for these spaces should also use materials and design elements that are consistent with the surrounding development and provide "human-scale" elements, like seating and weather protection, that create welcoming attractive places for people to enjoy.



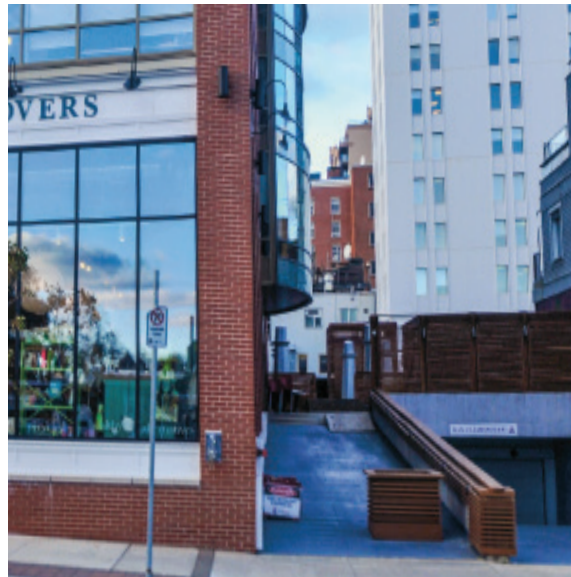
Providing Safe and Direct Mobility Routes

To create a comfortable environment for walking, rolling and cycling, properties should provide routes through parking areas and connections to sidewalks, active transportation routes and recreational paths. Development can also support walking, rolling and cycling by providing amenities, such as shelters and bicycle parking. By providing safe pathways, residents and visitors are able to access various modes of transportation more comfortably.



Reducing the Negative Impacts of Development Elements

To avoid negatively impacting surrounding neighbourhoods and people moving through them, developments must consider how building elements are located and designed. This includes carefully designing parking lots and garage accesses so that their entrances and exits consider pedestrian movement and they include appropriate screening and safety features, like lighting and pedestrian pathways. This also includes considering how unsightly elements, like garbage storage and utilities, can be located and screened on the site to reduce negative impacts on neighbouring properties.



Encouraging Sustainable Design for Parking Lots

Sustainable design of parking lots helps to minimize stormwater runoff and urban heat island effects. This can be achieved by including features like trees and green infrastructure. Smaller-scale parking areas and reduced mandatory parking requirements can also support this goal.



BUILDING DESIGN

Building design means the design of buildings themselves. This includes the shape and size of buildings, architectural details, and the location of utilities and parking within buildings. The design of buildings can have significant impacts on the quality of life and have a positive impact on people in and around them. Objectives for development in suburban areas related to building design include:

Encouraging Human-Scale Design

Larger scale buildings must be carefully designed to avoid being imposing or uninteresting. Human-scale design ensures that portions of a building that people regularly interact with, including entrances, windows, and architectural features, are included at a scale and size that is relatable to people. These elements are then purposely repeated in a rhythm or pattern that creates a unique and recognizable building. This approach to design results in more attractive buildings that create enjoyable and interesting pedestrian experiences and contribute to neighbourhood character.

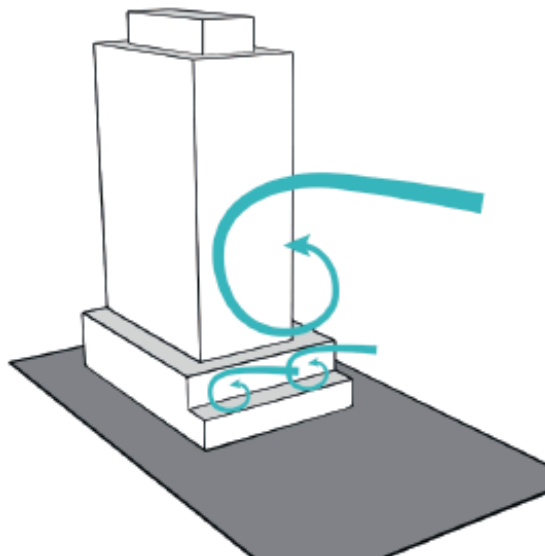
Encouraging Pedestrian-Oriented Streetwalls

Streetwalls are the lower portions of buildings facing streets. For taller buildings, the upper portions of buildings are often “stepped back” away from the street so that they do not feel imposing to people and create an uncomfortable pedestrian experience. Taller buildings should step upper storeys back further to help reduce their impact. These step backs also help to emphasize active uses, like stores, that are generally located on the ground floor of larger buildings. They create a more welcoming environment that people are encouraged to interact with.



Mitigating the Impacts of Wind and Shadow

Buildings can negatively impact public spaces by channeling wind and casting large shadows. Public spaces which are overly windy or shaded for extensive periods are not enjoyable spaces for users. They can be cold, uncomfortable and limit the ability of the space to host certain uses and activities such as gardens, landscaping and other activities that rely on sun. The impacts of wind and shadow should be reviewed and addressed through mitigation measures.



HAVE YOUR SAY!

Check out the [project webpage](#) to fill out a survey on this topic! The survey will be open from June 2, 2021 until July 16, 2021.

Your feedback will help us to write future planning policy and regulations.

Find out more about the Regional Plan Review at www.shapeyourcityhalifax.ca/regional-plan.

Questions? Email us: regionalplan@halifax.ca