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Item No. 15.1.2
Halifax Regional Council
January 23, 2024

TO: Mayor Savage and Members of Halifax Regional Council

SUBMITTED BY: Original Signed

Cathie O'Toole, Chief Administrative Officer

DATE: October 31, 2023

SUBJECT: **Halifax Common Master Plan Review and Implementation**

ORIGIN

February 8, 2022, Regional Council motion (Item No.15.3.1):

MOVED by Councillor Smith, seconded by Councillor Russell

THAT Halifax Regional Council:

1. Repeal the 1994 Halifax Common Plan and adopt the Halifax Common Master Plan (Master Plan) in principle as a guiding document as contained in Attachment A of the November 4, 2021 staff report, as a guiding document for open space planning, management, and development within the Halifax Common; and

MOTION PUT AND PASSED UNANIMOUSLY

Not present: Councillor Mason

MOVED by Councillor Cleary, seconded by Councillor Russell

THAT the motion be amended to include new section 2 which reads as follows:

2. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to undertake public consultation and a review of the Master Plan and return to Regional Council within 18 months with the results of the consultation and any recommended amendments, along with implementation plans as may be advised.

MOTION PUT AND PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.

Not present: Councillor Mason

December 13, 2022, Regional Council motion (Item No. 15.4.2):

MOVED by Councillor Mason, seconded by Councillor Russell

THAT Halifax Regional Council direct the Chief Administrative Officer to:

1. Engage with other tenants, stakeholders and the public to obtain feedback on the project as presented at the November 17, 2022 Community Planning and Economic Development Standing Committee presentation from the Board of the Halifax Public Gardens Foundation; and

2. Prepare a staff report assessing the proposal for incorporation into further development of the Wanderers' Block within the context of the 2022 Halifax Common Master Plan as approved in principle, and identifying possible funding sources, and exploring governance models for the Public Gardens as a whole.

MOTION PUT AND PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.

Not present: Councillor Cuttell

LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

Halifax Regional Municipality Charter

Section 61(3)

The property vested in the Municipality, absolutely or in trust, is under the exclusive management and control of the Council, unless an Act of the Legislature provides otherwise.

Section 79A (1)

Subject to subsections (2) to (4), the Municipality may only spend money for municipal purposes if
(a) the expenditure is included in the Municipality's operating budget or capital budget or is otherwise authorized by the Municipality...

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Halifax Regional Council:

1. Adopt the Halifax Common Master Plan as contained in Attachment A, as a guiding document for open space planning, management, and development within the Halifax Common, except for the Wanderers Grounds Site Plan and its related "description of uses" and "Design and Programming Guidance."
2. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to complete detailed planning of the Wanderers Block and return to Regional Council with a staff report and updates to the Halifax Common Master Plan as may be required; and
3. Approve the Implementation Plan as contained in Attachment C, as a guiding document, for consideration and inclusion in future budget and business plans commencing in 2024/25.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On February 8, 2022, the Halifax Common Master Plan (Master Plan) was approved in principle by Regional Council with the direction to do more public consultation, recommend any amendments, and prepare an implementation plan. Separately, on December 13, 2022, Regional Council directed an assessment of the proposal for a public conservatory for the Public Gardens within the context of the Master Plan for incorporation into further development of the Wanderers Block.

The public consultation that was undertaken included an on-line public survey on the Master Plan and questions on the implementation priorities for capital improvements and other projects for the municipal lands of the Halifax Common. Through the survey feedback, there were no major issues with the Master Plan brought forth by the public at large. Most of the feedback was in advocating for recreation facilities on the Common, most notably for pickleball courts, improvements to the skatepark, and expanding the Halifax Lancers facility. Based on the public consultation, no overall changes to the Master Plan are proposed, except for the detailed planning for the Wanderers Block, which is identified as a project, as outlined within this report.

The identified proposed implementation priorities for the next 1 to 3 years, which were informed by the public consultation, are:

- Central Common: construct the playground, implement the skatepark redesign, and upgrade the central path and plaza entrance.
- North Common: upgrade main pathways and neighbourhood plaza entrances.
- Wanderers Grounds: undertake detailed planning for the site with reinvestment in the horticulture facility, works yard, and other facilities as determined.

The next proposed steps in the planning for the Halifax Common are to undertake the recommended detailed planning for the Wanderers Block to determine the various uses, spatial configurations, and design and programming guidelines for each of the facilities. This work would include continued engagement with the tenants and stakeholders and include a broader community consultation. Once a plan for the Wanderers Grounds is determined, the Master Plan would be updated to reflect the outcomes of the detailed planning work and the progress status of the Master Plan's implementation. Staff would return to Regional Council with a revised Master Plan reflecting these updates.

BACKGROUND

The Halifax Common Master Plan (Master Plan) was presented to Regional Council on February 8, 2022. At the time, there was some public sentiment that since the last public consultation was in 2019, the Master Plan would benefit from having more time for the public to review the documents and provide feedback on the plan. The Master Plan was approved in principle and staff were given the direction to do more public consultation, report back with any recommended amendments, and to prepare an implementation plan.

One of the key outcomes of the Master Plan was an identification that following its adoption, a detailed plan for Wanderers Block was to be developed. This area is comprised of public open space, the Richard Power House, Bell Road depot and horticulture facility, Wanderers Field, where there is a temporary stadium, the Wanderers Lawn Bowls Club, and the Halifax Lancers, a non-profit horse-riding school and equine therapy centre. There are decisions to be made about the needs to renew the Bell Road depot and horticulture facility, the Wanderers Field and the possibility of a permanent stadium, and a desire for the Halifax Lancers to expand. There are overall spatial challenges to accommodate and organize these uses based on the limited area of the Wanderers Block. The Wanderers Lawn Bowls Club, Halifax Lancers, and Halifax Wanderers Football Club have presented information about their organizations and interests to the Community Planning and Economic Development Standing Committee (CPED) in 2021, 2022 and 2023.

In the fall of 2022, Robert Pace, Chair of the Board of Public Gardens Foundation presented a proposal to CPED for a public conservatory for the Public Gardens to be incorporated with a renewal of the Bell Road depot and horticulture facility. Regional Council directed staff to prepare a staff report assessing the proposal within the context of the Master Plan for incorporation into further development of the Wanderers Block.

DISCUSSION

The Master Plan is a guide for decision making relating to the open space within the Halifax Common geographic area. It establishes a framework for decisions relating to the use and management of open space and identifies where improvements and investment should be made for municipally owned parkland and streets. The Master Plan was developed with extensive public engagement throughout the planning process that included public meetings, workshops, and online surveys.

Public Consultation – Online Survey and Written Submissions

Building on the previous public participation for the Master Plan, the approach to the public consultation was as a review of the completed plan and an opportunity to gather input for the development of an

implementation plan for municipal projects. The Master Plan documents were made available for public review on the Shape Your City Halifax online platform. An online survey was open for nine months to allow enough time for people to review the report documents over different seasons. In addition, the public was invited to contact staff with questions or comments, and to make written submissions.

Online Survey

The summary of the survey feedback is found in the Survey Summary Report contained in Attachment B. The survey was organized into three sections: General Comments section, Detailed Feedback section, and Implementation Priorities section. Since this was a voluntary survey, the sample of respondents is not necessarily representative of the population of Halifax. Voluntary sampling bias is a likely issue, meaning that those who feel strongly about a topic are more likely to respond to the survey. The results should be interpreted as an exploratory study, rather than a poll, to gain a sense of opinions, priorities, and concerns on the Master Plan related topics. From this, the following are highlights:

- The survey received 381 submissions. Most of the survey participants were from the Halifax peninsula area making up 59% of respondents. Three out of ten participants self identified as having an affiliation with the skatepark and one in five participants self identified with the Halifax Lancers.
- The General Comments section received 36 submissions. Recurring topic themes included improvements to the skatepark, support for more unstructured recreation, concerns about the loss of greenspace with the recent hospital parkade, the stadium on the Wanderers Grounds (both in support of and in opposition to a permanent stadium), and general thanks and support for the Master Plan.
- The Detailed Feedback section received 120 submissions. There was little negative feedback or constructive criticism received for revising the Master Plan. Instead, most comments were advocating for the skatepark or Halifax Lancers facility.
- The Implementation Priorities received 316 submissions. Improving pathways and park entrances for the North and Central Common was a top concern followed by the redesign and improvements of the skatepark. Improving the park-like character of streets also ranked very high. Other top park renewals included improving the general park areas, the redesign of the Centennial Fountain, and allocating more space for unstructured recreation on the North Common. Conservation work and the development of management plans were not high priorities for the public but are important for the management of the assets.

Written Submissions

Email submissions were received from 37 individuals with 23 people commenting on the need for pickleball courts, 7 people providing personal perspectives or ideas on various aspects of the Master Plan, and 7 people amplifying the request from the Friends of the Halifax Common (FHC) for a public hearing style meeting for the Master Plan.

The FHC provided two written submissions, submitted by David Garrett on January 23, 2023, and Lawrence McEachern on March 2, 2023. Copies were distributed to members of Regional Council. The FHC provided several observations about the Master Plan with the most prominent being: the need for additional forms of public consultation such a public meeting; the need for provincial legislation to provide greater protection of the Halifax Common; and changes to the Master Plan to improve its clarity.

Conclusions on the Master Plan from the Public Consultation

Throughout the public consultation period, the need for additional forms of engagement were assessed. While the FHC noted a desire to have a public meeting, this was not found to be a common sentiment or request. Extensive public engagement occurred in the original development of the Master Plan, which has now been supplemented by the follow-up public consultation that has occurred over the past year.

Through the survey feedback, there were no major issues with the Master Plan brought forth by the public at large. Most of the feedback was in advocating for recreation facilities on the Halifax Common, most notably for pickleball courts, improvements to the skatepark, and expanding the Halifax Lancers facility. In review of this input, the refurbishment of the skatepark is addressed in the Implementation Plan and the Lancers proposal will be considered through the detail planning for the Wanderers Grounds. The pickleball

courts will be reviewed through a needs assessment within a broader scope for the entire Halifax peninsula area.

Based on the public consultation, no overall changes to the Master Plan are proposed, except for the detailed planning for the Wanderers Block, which is identified as a project, as outlined within this report.

Implementation Plan

The Implementation Plan outlines the specific steps needed to achieve the Master Plan's long-term vision and goals. It provides a roadmap for the implementation of the Master Plan to ensure that resources are allocated efficiently and effectively. The Implementation Plan is to be used in the development of municipal budgets and business plans. Factors such as funding availability and community needs would be assessed each year. While there is flexibility in adjustments to project timing and scope, the Implementation Plan represents a series of sequential initiatives that can be followed.

The Implementation Plan is contained in Attachment C and has the following components:

- The Action Plan is a compilation of all the actions in the Master Plan. Each action is identified by type and category and given a prospective timeframe for implementation along with comments about its status.
- The Capital Projects identify areas where the municipality should direct capital reinvestment for streets, municipally owned parkland, and recreation facilities within the Halifax Common.
- The Phasing Plan outlines a timeline for when the capital projects and improvements could be implemented over a ten-year timeframe and identifies the sequence of tasks and project phasing.

The implementation priorities within the next 1 to 3 years are as follows:

- Central Common: construct the playground, implement the skatepark redesign, and upgrade the central path and plaza entrance.
- North Common: upgrade main pathways and neighbourhood plaza entrances.
- Wanderers Grounds: undertake detailed planning for the site with reinvestment in the horticulture facility, works yard, and other facilities as determined.

Detailed Planning for the Wanderers Block and the Public Gardens Conservatory Proposal

One of the recommended next steps with the adoption of the Master Plan is to undertake detailed planning for the Wanderers Block. At the time in which the Master Plan was being developed, it was and continues to be recognized that there are spatial constraints in accommodating the various uses and interests in this area. Currently all the facilities co-exist on the site, but there is limited space for any of the tenants to grow and expand without impacting or displacing the other adjacent facilities. The Wanderers Block also includes the Provincial lands comprised of the Museum of Natural History, a new parkade, and open space. The Province's interest in participating in the detail planning for the Wanderers Block needs to be determined, but at a minimum the Museum grounds and surface parking lot are important elements of the envisioned detailed plan project. The Municipal Wanderers Grounds consist of the following facilities and assets:

- Bell Road Depot and Horticulture Facility: The Municipality's presence on the Wanderers Grounds includes the Parks Operations depot and the horticulture facility. The Parks depot directly supports the maintenance of the Wanderers sports field and lawn bowling green as well as the other playing fields, park assets, and winter maintenance of pathways within the Halifax Common and Peninsula. In the winter, the Public Works department uses this depot as the downtown hub for sidewalk winter works operations. Some of the Parks Operations groups have relocated to the renovated Mackintosh Depot, but the Field Operations group still need to continue to have space on the Wanderers Grounds site.

The horticulture facility and greenhouses directly support the adjacent Halifax Public Gardens and are essential to maintaining it to the standards that are associated with its designation as a National Historic Site. As articulated in the Statement of Commemorative Intent, the Halifax Public Gardens is commemorated as a rare surviving example of a Victorian public garden. The historic value of the

designation lies in the Public Gardens reflections of the 19th century's interest in science, particularly the study of botany and the art of horticultural design. The Gardenesque design elements and High Victorian planting practices place an emphasis on bedding plants with an appreciation for the exotic and brilliant display and allowing the plants to arrive at a state of perfection. (*Halifax Public Gardens Commemorative Integrity Statement, April 1999.*)

The greenhouses on the Wanderers Grounds have been essential in the propagation and production of the plant material for the Public Gardens, particularly the flowering annuals and tender perennials bedding plants. The notion that the greenhouses could be reduced in size by buying commercial nursery plants is problematic in that it could limit the uniqueness of plant material and the creativity of the horticulture design for which the Public Gardens are designated. The horticulture facility also supports other planting beds within the Halifax Common and the enhanced maintenance areas in downtown Halifax. With the recent streetscaping, park renewal projects, and the Cogswell redevelopment project, the inventory of planting beds that Horticulture Operations maintains is increasing. The horticulture facility consists of a works yard and several older buildings and greenhouses that are inefficient, unattractive, and in need of revitalization. Given the importance of the facility, there is an essential need for the greenhouses to remain as an annex to the Public Gardens to support and maintain the horticultural significance of the gardens.

- Richard Power House: The historic residence named for the first superintendent of the Public Gardens has undergone major restoration work and now houses the Youth Centre with drop-in programming and meeting room rentals. There is small patio area that is used by the Centre, that immediately adjoins the horticulture buildings and works yard.
- Multi-use Path: The Master Plan provides policy direction to promote pedestrian connections through large blocks of the Halifax Common. All the facilities within the Wanderers Grounds are fenced with limited public access. The multi-use path provides the only public space and an important connection through the Wanderers Block connecting Veterans Memorial Lane at Summer Street with Citadel High School on Bell Road.
- Halifax Lancers: The Lancers are a long-standing tenant with a presence on the Wanderers Grounds since 1942. They are a non-profit riding school and equine therapy centre, and their horses have become integral to the character of Halifax. The Lancers lease their facility from the Municipality and wish to grow their programming through expanding both in additional buildings and outdoor paddock space..
- Wanderers Lawn Bowls Club: The Wanderers Lawn Bowls is the longest standing tenant of the Wanderers Grounds dating back to 1887. The club has had a membership resurgence. While there are no expansion plans, the facility's current location in the centre of the immediately adjoining horticulture facility and works yard, poses spatial challenges in rationalizing other uses on the Wanderers Grounds. The building structure used for the clubhouse is non-winterized and at a point where major recapitalization or replacement is needed.
- Wanderers Field and Stadium: In 2017, refurbishments of the Wanderers Field as a professional grade, natural turf sportsfield were completed. The Halifax Wanderers Football Club Corporation has a non-exclusive license agreement for the installation of temporary stadium seating and related venue facilities on the Wanderers Grounds and rental of the field for games at fair market value. The term of the License Agreement lasts until the end of November 2023, with an option to renew for a further year. The venue has a total load capacity set at 8000 with seating for around 6400 in its current configuration. The Club is interested in the establishment of a permanent stadium with an expansion to approximately 8500 seats. To date, there have been no formal discussions with the Halifax Wanderers Football Club regarding a new agreement, nor an expansion of the current operations on the Wanderers Grounds. The Municipality maintains direct management and control of the field and other users, including amateur sports organizations, can book through rental agreements by contacting HRM Parks & Recreation.

Public Gardens Conservatory Proposal

The conservatory proposal as presented at CPED outlined a vision to consolidate the municipal horticulture buildings and greenhouses into a new single public conservatory that would house a working horticulture centre with an underground level to support operations and maintenance. The envisioned Victorian style conservatory would add to the visitor experience of the Public Gardens with an interpretive centre and educational programming of its history and horticulture significance. In the scenario presented, the Wanderers Lawn Bowling facility would be relocated on Provincial lands elsewhere on the Halifax peninsula and the landscape surrounding the new conservatory and Power House would be redeveloped with public pathways and landscaped grounds. The contemplated \$8 million investment would be financed through cost sharing from the three orders of government with some private fundraising. In later plans, such as those presented for the Wanderers Field and Stadium, spaces for production greenhouses, that are essential to supporting the Public Gardens have been omitted.

Greenhouses and public conservatories differ in their function and are not necessarily interchangeable. A public conservatory is often designed for the display of plants from other parts of the world, such as tropical or Mediterranean biomes, whereas a greenhouse is designed for plant cultivation, providing controlled conditions for optimized growth. From a review of other botanical conservatories, the convention is to also have greenhouses that provide back of house support separate from the main display houses. For example, the Allen Gardens Conservatory in Toronto has greenhouses annexed to its conservatory spaces.

A new conservatory could be an element of a new horticultural facility and the detailed planning for the Wanderers Block. However, the Municipality's main emphasis should be on improving its current facilities and accommodating the other existing uses on the Wanderers Grounds. Investment in the municipal greenhouses and works depot should address renewing the horticulture facility by modernizing the propagation green houses, improving the function and appearance of the structures, finding efficiencies for the works yard, and increasing public visitation opportunities and educational programming. The challenge with the Wanderers Grounds is that there is very limited space to consider both the greenhouse complex and a full public conservatory within the site. The primary focus for the horticulture facility should be on the propagation and greenhouse operations. A conservatory or display house could be in addition to, but not a substitution for the working greenhouses.

A newly envisioned horticulture facility as outlined above, could respond favourably to more recent common Federal and Provincial funding themes such as climate action, through efficiency updates to facilities, and food security through urban farming programs. Opportunities for reconciliation might also be explored with an increased emphasis naturalization and native plantings throughout the Halifax Common to reinforce the relationship of the Halifax Common and the Mi'kmaw that is expressed within the Master Plan. During the next steps, funding opportunities will be explored to a greater degree.

Governance Models

Through the presentation on the conservatory, there was an additional proposal for a new governance model for the administration and upkeep of the Public Gardens and its related facilities. This is not a proposal from a philanthropic organization with an infusion of capital or ongoing funding, but rather a realignment of municipal resources that might in turn lead to governance models and partnerships to better support the Public Gardens. This might be advantageous, but the current focus should be on determining the spatial and programming future for the Wanderers Block, from which determinations over governance and partnerships may naturally emerge as opportunities.

Conclusions and Next Steps

By adopting the Master Plan, Regional Council is establishing policies and a framework for decision-making on issues pertaining to the management of activities and uses of the open space within the Halifax Common. With the adoption of the Implementation Plan, direction is provided for improvements and

investments that should be made, with timeframes and a sequence of tasks. The Implementation Plan would be used for consideration and inclusion in subsequent municipal budgets and business plans.

The next proposed steps in the planning for the Halifax Common are to undertake the recommended detailed planning for the Wanderers Block to determine the various uses, spatial configurations, and design and programming guidelines for each of the facilities. As emphasized in this report, there are spatial challenges and there should be no illusion of adequately accommodating all the stated desires in an attractive form that is necessary for Halifax Common. This work would include continued engagement with the tenants and stakeholders and include a broader community consultation. This will be the subject of the future staff report and expected updates to the Master Plan.

While the staff report and implementation plan are written with the focus on the optimum use of public open space, it is acknowledged that Halifax is in the midst of a housing crisis. There are members of our community that are experiencing homelessness and sheltering in parks, including spaces within the Halifax Common, such as Victoria Park which is a designated outdoor shelter location. There are also people sheltering in locations on the North and Central Commons. The Halifax Common Master Plan does not directly consider this situation, but this is not to diminish the importance of this issue. There are separate and concerted efforts to find solutions to homeless and sheltering in parks, so that people may be adequately housed, and municipal open space may fully return to broad public use.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no immediate financial implications associated with this report. However, there are financial implications that will need to be considered for future budget and business cycles which will be the subject of future staff reports or business plans.

RISK CONSIDERATION

The primary risk in not adopting the Halifax Common Master Plan would be the absence of an overall guiding document for open space planning, development, and management within the Halifax Common, since the 1994 Halifax Common Plan was repealed by Regional Council in 2022 when the current Master Plan was adopted in principle.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement involved stakeholder meetings, online survey, and written submissions. Additional information about the community engagement is found in Attachment B.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no immediate environmental implications associated with this report. Future capital projects outlined in the Implementation Plan would include reviews of environmental conditions as may be applicable.

ALTERNATIVES

Regional Council could choose to:

1. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to amend parts of the Master Plan as identified by Regional Council and return to the Region Council with a staff report.

2. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to undertake more public consultation on the Master Plan, other than that which is to be undertaken for the detail planning of the Wanderers Block and return to Regional Council with a staff report.
3. Identify changes to the Implementation Plan, which depending upon the scope of such amendments may require a supplementary report.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A – Halifax Common Master Plan

Attachment B – Survey Summary Report, Halifax Common Master Plan Public Consultation & Review

Attachment C – Implementation Plan, Halifax Common Master Plan

A copy of this report can be obtained online at halifax.ca or by contacting the Office of the Municipal Clerk at 902.490.4210.

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