

REGIONAL PLAN THEMES & DIRECTIONS

WHAT WE HEARD REPORT

HALIFAX

November 2021

Acknowledgments

The Halifax Regional Municipality wishes to thank all residents and stakeholders who took the time to participate in engagement activities and provide feedback on the Regional Plan Review Themes & Directions. Our thanks are also extended to Leticia Smillie, Jill MacLellan, Mapfumo Chidzonga, Paul Johnston, Mary Chisholm, Emilie Pothier, Shannon Miedema, Kevin Boutilier, Taylor Owen, Emma Wattie, Samantha Page, Penny Kuhn, Tanya Davis, Erin Blay and David MacIsaac for their participation in the Virtual Q&A Sessions. We would also like to thank Deanna Wilmshurst, Michaelyn Thompson, Megan Couture and the Office of Diversity & Inclusion/ANSAIO for their support and guidance.

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BACKGROUND

The Regional Plan Review Themes & Directions Report was published and presented at the Community Planning and Economic Development Standing Committee (CPED) on May 20, 2021. The purpose of that document is to explain the proposed scope of the Regional Plan Review to the public, stakeholders, and Regional Council, and seek feedback. It shares ideas about key planning issues and provides details of the work that will be completed during the Review.

This What We Heard Report provides a description of the public engagement process that was undertaken to receive feedback on the Themes & Directions Report, as well as a summary and analysis of the comments received. It is accompanied by a series of attachments for reference, including:

- Appendix A - Virtual Q&A Session Transcripts
- Appendix B - Survey Summary Report
- Appendix C - Comment Forum Responses
- Appendix D - Correspondence Log
- Appendix E - Correspondence Attachments
- Appendix F - Key Themes Table

WHAT WE DID

Public engagement for the Regional Plan Review Themes & Directions Report followed the Regional Public Participation Program approved by Regional Council on December 15, 2020. This updated Public Participation Program was adopted to address the public health and safety regulations established by the Province of Nova Scotia restricting the size of public gatherings as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. These regulations resulted in a focus on online engagement tools, with more traditional options available for those with limited access to or comfort with the internet.

SHAPE YOUR CITY PAGE

The Regional Plan Review's Shape Your City page (www.shapeyourcityhalifax.ca/regional-plan) has been live since the project's initiation in February 2020. For the Themes & Directions phase of engagement, the page was updated to include a number of engagement tools designed to encourage residents to learn about the Themes & Directions Report and provide feedback. These engagement tools included recordings and transcripts of live Q&A events, an FAQ page, a survey and a comment forum. These tools are discussed in greater detail below.

The Shape Your City page also included a variety of reports and background documents for residents to review and learn about the project. These included:

- The Themes & Directions Report and a Key Ideas executive summary
- Issue Papers providing additional information on topics of interest (including the Preliminary Population & Housing Analysis, Affordable Housing, Rural Community Planning, Suburban Community Design, Planning Tools for Protecting and Conserving Land, and Density Bonusing)
- Background documents (including the various priorities plans being implemented through the Review)
- Important links

During the engagement period from May 20 to July 16, 2021 the Shape Your City webpage received over 3,600 visits. These visits included:

- 2,908 Aware Participants (participants who made at least one visit to the Shape Your City page)
- 1,222 Informed Participants (participants who clicked on at least one link on the Shape Your City page)
 - 362 Participants downloaded a document
 - 328 Participants visited multiple project pages
 - 92 Participants visited the Key Dates page
 - 35 Participants visited the FAQ page
- 828 Engaged Participants (participants who contributed to an engagement tool)

The top 3 documents that were downloaded from Shape Your City were:

- Themes and Directions full document (335 Downloads)
- Suburban Issue Paper (61 Downloads)
- Key Ideas (60 Downloads)

VIRTUAL Q&AS

The Regional Plan Review Team hosted a series of six Virtual Q&A sessions using Microsoft Teams Live Events. The Q&As were each focused on a topic of interest and featured a short presentation from the Regional Plan Review Team before attendees asked questions of a panel of HRM staff working on the Regional Plan Review and the subject area. Attendees were able to call in to the events if they were unable to attend online. Virtual Q&As included:

- Social Policy (June 11 at 12:00pm)
- Housing (June 14 at 6:30pm)
- Climate (June 15 at 12:00pm)
- Environment (June 15 at 6:30pm)
- Mobility (June 16 at 12:00pm)
- Long Range Planning (June 16 at 6:30pm)

Following the live events, recordings of the sessions were posted on HRM's Youtube page. Links to the videos and transcripts of the conversations were then posted on the project's Shape Your City page. Transcripts of all six of the Virtual Q&A sessions are included as Appendix A.

ONLINE SURVEY

An online survey was live on the Regional Plan Review's Shape Your City page from June 3, 2021 to July 16, 2021. The survey was designed to discuss each of the themes identified in the Themes & Directions Report.

The survey was an exploratory questionnaire to gauge respondent's opinions and priorities with respect to a range of topics within the Themes and Directions Report. The survey examined how and where growth should be directed, what features people valued in their communities and what values they'd like to see in the future. Topics embedded within the survey included growth, complete communities, housing, the environment, climate change, parks and wilderness areas, transportation, and impacts of the pandemic.

The survey included the following types of questions:

- Questions to indicate the level of AGREEMENT or DISAGREEMENT with a statement.
- Questions to RANK the relative importance of issues – based on priorities.
- Questions that allow more details.

The survey tool available through Shape Your City is frequently used for a variety of municipal policy initiatives. However, it is not designed to be statistically representative. The survey tool facilitates feedback from interested residents and groups, as an additional way to engage and provide feedback. As a result, the results of the survey are strongly influenced by volunteer sampling bias.

A total of 831 surveys were completed. The full summary of the results of the survey is included as Appendix B. Highlights include:

- Respondents saw the importance of all the building blocks to achieving complete communities, with access to public open spaces being ranked as most important. Respondents expressed frustration that the question limited the number of building blocks that could be selected as priorities.
- Respondents identified housing affordability and protecting natural spaces and wildlife as the two highest priorities for planning for the next thirty years.
- The majority of respondents identified Market Housing as their preferred housing type but noted the need for affordable housing for this to be viable.
- Respondents strongly supported environmental protection in coastal areas and expressed concern over the impacts of climate change, with loss of electricity and extreme weather events being the highest ranked concerns associated with climate change.
- Respondents were fairly evenly split amongst all the features identified for consideration when designing suburban communities. The three most highly ranked were creating welcoming open spaces, prioritizing pedestrians, and using sustainable site and building design.
- The two highest ranking features identified by Respondents when thinking about the future rural communities were a desire for living in a village-like or town-like community where housing, shops and services are clustered and easy to access, and having access to high-speed internet at home.
- Respondents strongly expressed a need for enhanced transit and active transportation connections, but there was low interest in locating high-rise, mixed use buildings along the Bus Rapid Transit Network.

- Respondents identified their preferred method for participation in community decision-making was online surveys but there was also interest in community, virtual, and public open houses led by HRM staff.

ONLINE COMMENT FORUM

An open comment forum was hosted on Shape Your City using the Story Telling tool from June 14, 2021 to July 16, 2021. This tool provided another option for registered Shape Your City users to provide comments regarding the Themes & Directions Report. A total of seven comments were received from five contributors and they are included as Appendix C.

CORRESPONDENCE

Since the release of the Themes & Directions Report on May 20, 2021, over 200 pieces of correspondence have been received. This includes emails sent to the project email (regionalplan@halifax.ca), emails and inquiries sent to HRM staff and the Clerks Office, and phone calls with the Regional Plan Review Team. A complete inventory of the correspondence is included as Appendix D and any attachments are included as Appendix E.

In addition to comments and feedback regarding the Themes & Directions Report, about 40 requests to consider Regional Plan amendments for individual properties were received, including:

- Requests to initiate secondary planning of future serviced communities (Sandy Lake, Highway 102 West Corridor, Morris Lake);
- Requests to amend the Urban Reserve designation to allow development sooner than expected by current Regional Plan policy;
- Requests for adjustments to the Urban Service Area and/or Water Service Area to allow for serviced development on various properties;
- Requests for amendments in urban and rural locations to enable greater development density than current policy allows; and

- Requests to amend policy and regulations on industrial lands.

A summary of these requests is provided in Attachment C of the December 2021 Council Report Package.

BOARD & COMMITTEE MEETINGS

Staff presented the Themes & Directions Report to various Standing Committees of Council, Advisory Boards and Committees, based on their Terms of Reference, and answered questions from their members (see Table 1 below). This was done in an effort to gather comments from the diverse stakeholders that sit on Regional Council's various boards and committees at an early phase of the Regional Plan Review.

The Regional Plan Review Team collected minutes and notes from these meetings and invited the Boards and Committees to submit any additional comments in writing.

Table 1: Presentations to Board and Committees

BOARD/COMMITTEE	DATE OF PRESENTATION
Community Planning & Economic Development Standing Committee	May 20
Environment & Sustainability Standing Committee	June 3
Women's Advisory Committee	June 3
Regional Council – Committee of the Whole	June 8
Regional Watersheds Advisory Board	June 10
Active Transportation Advisory Committee	June 17
Halifax Peninsula Planning Advisory Committee	June 21
Transportation Standing Committee	June 24
North West Planning Advisory Committee	July 7
Executive Standing Committee	July 12
Youth Advisory Committee	July 15
Accessibility Advisory Committee	July 19
Heritage Advisory Committee	July 28

STAKEHOLDER MEETINGS

Stakeholder outreach has taken place throughout the Regional Plan Review and helped to shape the Themes & Directions report. This has included more than 25 meetings with the development community, community groups, expert stakeholders and other government organizations.

The Regional Plan Review team is continuing to hold stakeholder meetings with any residents or community groups who have requested them to discuss comments or concerns related to the Themes & Directions report.

PRIORITY PLAN ENGAGEMENT

One of the main goals of the Regional Plan Review is to implement the recommendations of the various priority plans completed since the adoption of the 2014 Regional Plan. The priority plans each included their own robust engagement programs, and feedback received as part of the Regional Plan Review engagement has included strong support for the implementation those plans. These engagement programs included:

- Integrated Mobility Plan
 - Three rounds of engagement, 16 public workshops and six public open houses
 - 2000 responses to three online surveys
 - Phase 1 – 130 people at workshops, 176 people at pop-ups
 - Phase 2 – 71 people at workshops
 - Phase 3 – 165 people at workshops
- Rapid Transit Strategy
 - The pop-ups reached 939 people
 - The survey received 6,125 responses
 - 40 participants participated in stakeholder workshops
- Halifax Green Network Plan
 - Phase 1 – 560 people, 9000 comments/ideas
 - Phase 2 – 1715 comments
 - Phase 3 – 6 public open house meetings held
- HalifACT
 - 5 workshops, 35 pop-ups, 25 presentations to conferences/stakeholder groups/university classes
 - 2800+ website visits
 - 1,300 survey responses

HOW WE GOT THE WORD OUT

The success of any public engagement is largely based on generating awareness of the project amongst residents and stakeholders. Given that the Regional Plan provides policy for the entire municipality, a wide variety of advertising tools were needed to reach HRM's residents. Advertising included:

- Social Media Posts and Advertising, including:
 - Facebook
 - Twitter
 - Instagram
- Newspaper Advertising, including:
 - Chronicle Herald
 - Eastern Shore Cooperator
 - Cobequid Wire
 - Cole Harbour Wire
 - Coastal Wire
- Online Advertising
- Public Service Announcement
- Newsletters sent to the Regional Plan Review Mailing List
- Newsletters sent to the Shape Your City Mailing List
- Newsletter sent to HRM's Office of Diversity & Inclusion to distribute amongst their networks
- Newsletter sent to HRM Community Developers to distribute amongst their local networks
- Memo sent to Regional Council
- Posts on the HRM Digital Screen Network

WHO PARTICIPATED

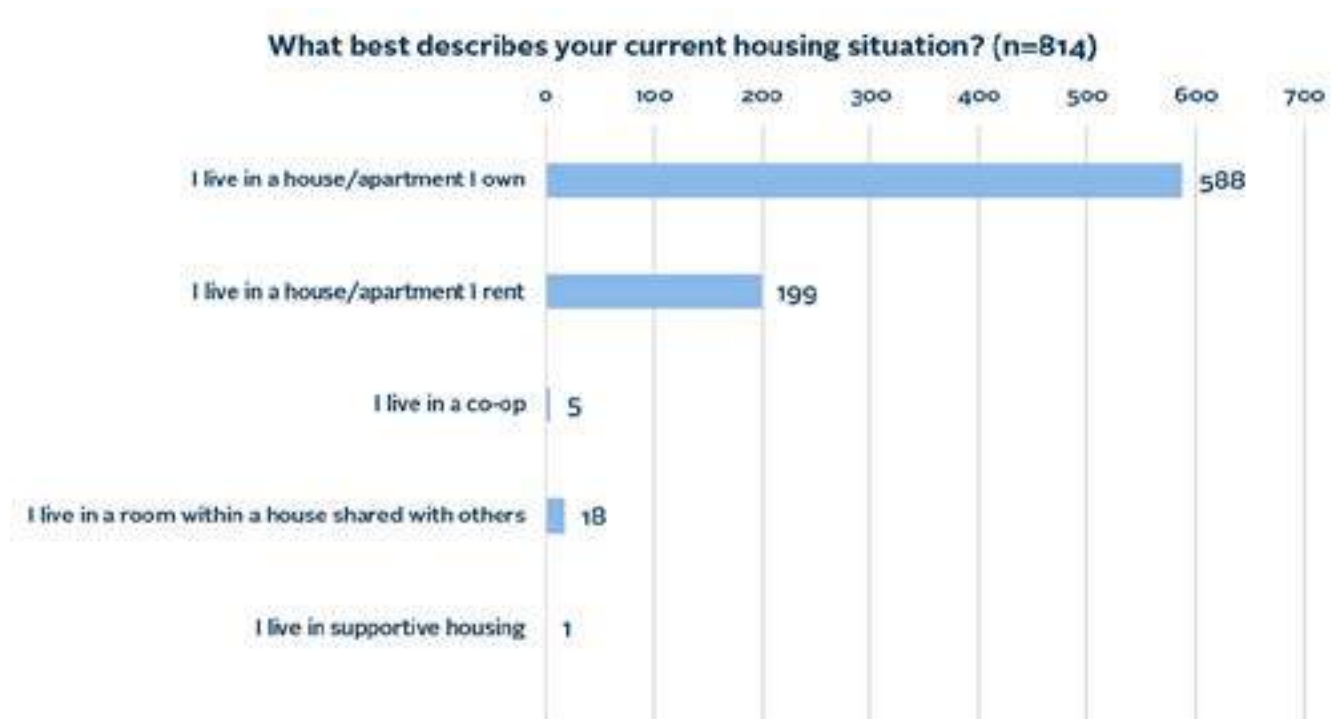
Table 2: Number of Participants

TYPE OF ENGAGEMENT	NUMBER OF EVENTS / PLATFORMS	PARTICIPANTS / VIDEO VIEWS
Shape Your City Page (Regional Plan Update Page)	1	2,908 Participants visited the webpage at least once 362 Participants downloaded documents
Virtual Q&A Live Events	6	Social Policy – at least 4 attendees Housing – at least 14 attendees Climate Change – at least 9 attendees Environment – at least 7 attendees Mobility – at least 6 attendees Long Range Planning – at least 4 attendees
Virtual Q&A Youtube Videos	6	Social Policy – 74 Views Housing – 75 Views Climate Change – 48 Views Environment – 62 Views Mobility – 37 Views Long-Range Planning - 43 Views (View Counts as of August 13)
Online Survey	1	831 Responses
Online Comment Forum	1	7 Responses from 5 contributors
Correspondence	N/A	Over 240 pieces of correspondence
Board and Committee Meetings	13	N/A

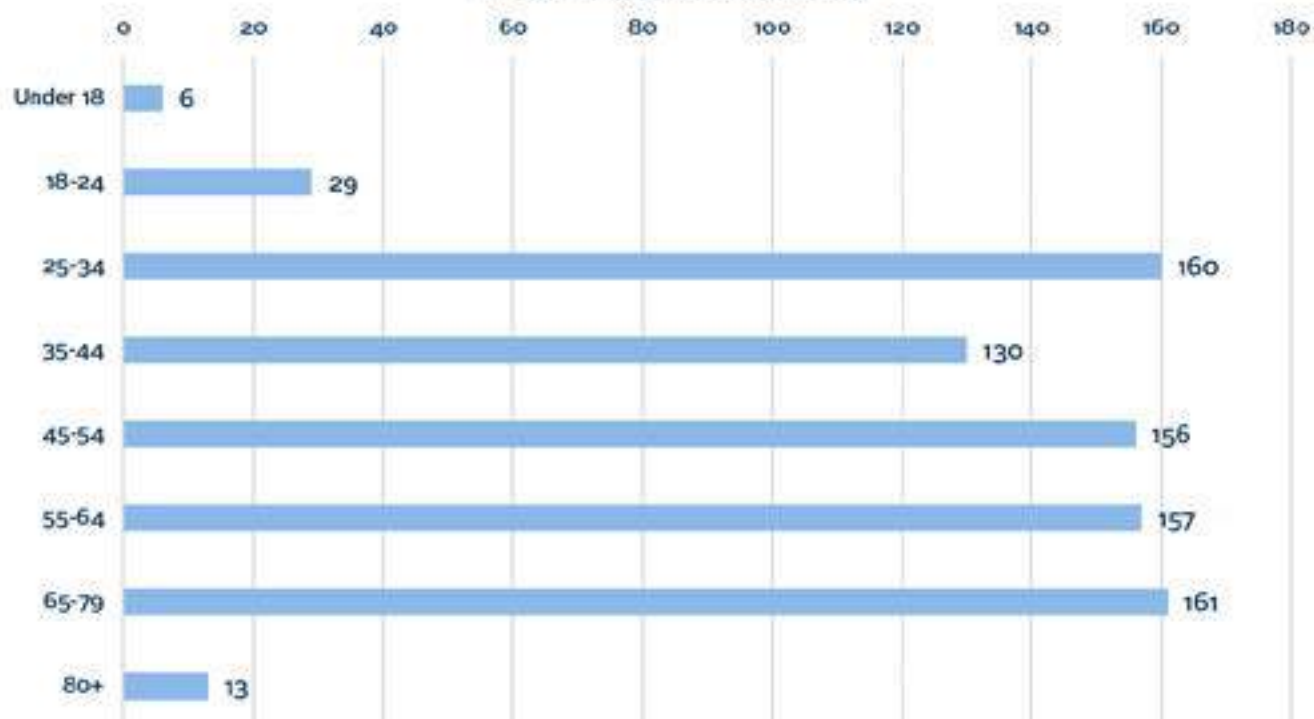
Respondents to the online survey were asked to provide basic demographic information about themselves. While the survey relied on self-selected respondents and was not designed to be statistically representative, this information can provide a basic insight into who participated in engagement using this tool:

- In terms of geography, survey respondents were fairly representative of the municipality's population with 40.9% of respondents identifying as living in a Suburban area and 19.8% of respondents identifying as living in a Rural area.
- The majority of respondents indicated that they owned their dwelling (72.2%). Other responses included:
 - 24.4% live in a house or apartment that they rent
 - 2.2% live a room in a house shared with others
 - 0.6% live in a co-op
 - 0.4% did not have access to permanent housing
 - 0.1% live in supportive housing

- The survey had fairly even response rates for age groups between 25 and 79. Responses by age group were as follows:
 - 0.7% under 18
 - 3.6% 18 to 24
 - 19.7% 25 to 34
 - 16% 35 to 44
 - 19.2% 45 to 54
 - 19.3% 55 to 64
 - 19.8% 65 to 79
 - 1.6% 80 and older



My age category is... (n=812)



WHAT WE HEARD

A summary of the feedback received from all sources is included in Appendix G with initial comments from staff on how the feedback will be used as the Regional Plan Review moves forward. Common messages received are discussed below, based on each of the themes in the Themes & Directions Report.



CONSIDERING THE REGIONAL SCALE FIRST

There was general acknowledgement throughout the engagement that the population in HRM is growing rapidly and, as a result, housing availability and affordability have become major concerns. While population growth was largely viewed positively, there were differing opinions on where the resulting development growth should take place.

Through correspondence, stakeholder meetings and survey responses there was support for directing new development into existing urban and suburban communities in order to protect undeveloped greenspaces and avoid costs associated with expanding services. However, there was also opposition to increasing density in the suburban area, in favour of stable, low density neighbourhoods. Through correspondence, community groups noted the need for clear and measurable criteria for why growth centres outside of the existing Urban Service Area have been selected, in order to better demonstrate that they have been studied and selected appropriately.

Through correspondence and stakeholder meetings, a coordinated group of community organizations and residents strongly requested that secondary planning for the Future Serviced Communities located near Sandy Lake Regional Park and Blue Mountain Birch Cove Lakes Area be prevented or delayed until the next Regional Plan Review. This request asked for additional studies to be completed to ensure that the health of the nearby wilderness parks would not be impacted by development.

There was general support for using the priorities plans to guide decision-making at the regional scale. This included using the Halifax Green Network Plan to lead development decisions and adopting the growth targets identified by the Integrated Mobility Plan as the basis for the Regional Plan.

There was general support for reviewing and updating the current Growth Centres and Urban Reserve lands identified by the Regional Plan to better reflect the actual intent for these areas and any changes that may have taken place in recent years. In particular, residents and Councillors from the rural area identified the need for careful consideration of rural communities, how their boundaries are defined, and what their goals and needs are.



BUILDING HEALTHIER & MORE COMPLETE COMMUNITIES

Through all engagement tools, residents strongly supported planning for complete communities. In the survey, when asked to identify the most important 'building blocks' for complete communities, many participants stated that all of the options identified were important and could not be ranked. Through correspondence, participants suggested that building blocks for complete communities should be clearly defined and measurable to better set expectations for residents. It was also suggested that a community's vision and needs for becoming a 'complete community' may vary, particularly in rural areas, so engagement with communities should be ongoing.

Regarding the Regional Centre, there was support for continuing to intensify development in this area and setting defined targets for density before enabling development outside the Urban Service Area. However, through correspondence, there were some also concerns around building heights, traffic congestion, and visibility for drivers related to increased development in urban communities around HRM.

For the Suburban Area, there was also strong interest in intensifying development in existing neighbourhoods before considering extensions to the Urban Service Area. However, there was vocal support for maintaining existing low density residential neighbourhoods. The need to establish complete and connected communities was noted as being particularly important in suburban communities to help reduce car dependency and improve access to services. There was general agreement that a defined framework to guide decision-making for planning applications in suburban areas is required until such time as the Suburban Plan is completed.

In the Rural Area, there were concerns regarding how different types of rural centres are being planned for across the region and the services required to better achieve these goals.



RECONSIDERING EMPLOYMENT AND INDUSTRIAL LANDS

There was minimal feedback received regarding planning for employment and industrial lands. As part of planning for complete communities there was interest in enhancing the inclusion of small-scale commercial uses in suburban and rural communities. A request was also received to review the scale of commercial uses permitted in rural centres for communities that have experienced significant population growth.



TRANSFORMING HOW WE MOVE IN OUR REGION

Public feedback supported the continued implementation of the Integrated Mobility Plan (IMP). There was strong support for investing in ‘complete streets’, including enhancing infrastructure for pedestrians and other modes of active transportation to make these options safer and more viable. In addition, correspondence and stakeholder meetings provided strong support for the IMP direction to plan for higher density development along the Bus Rapid Transit Network. However, survey respondents indicated less support for this approach. There was a desire for policies that would result in safer, more inclusive, and accessible transportation options for diverse groups.

There was considerable feedback provided through correspondence and stakeholder meetings around transit service in HRM. Participants identified the need for a long-term vision for transit service across the municipality. Concerns were raised about the lack of access to transit in newly built suburban communities and other areas where growth is taking place. In addition, through correspondence, requests were submitted to extend transit routes to specific areas, including Lawrencetown/Five Fathom Harbour, Beaver Bank, Herring Cove Lookoff and North End Halifax. However, there was also support from a community organization for maintaining the current Urban Transit Service Boundary.

In rural areas, there is interest in studying the use of ATVs on public roads. The survey results indicated that the two highest ranking preferred modes of transportation in the rural area included driving alone in private vehicles and active transportation (walking, cycling or using a mobility device).



SOCIAL PLANNING FOR COMMUNITY WELL-BEING

Through meetings with stakeholders and Committees there was general support for beginning to undertake social planning in HRM. Work suggested as part of this initiative included establishing an equity lens and gender lens when developing policy and making decisions, as well as considering the role of systematic racism, Treaty Rights and reconciliation efforts, and impacts on 2SLGBTQ+ individuals during planning processes in order to reduce inequalities and support underrepresented groups.

One of the most common concerns identified by residents was the need for additional affordable housing options and to address homelessness. Survey responses indicated that market ownership was generally the preferred housing type, but respondents identified the need for more affordable housing and smaller housing units to achieve this. Through meetings with stakeholders and industry experts, it was identified that external factors like population growth, consumer demand, and the high cost of labour, materials and land all play a role

in housing affordability. It was identified that housing policy should be flexible to allow for unexpected changes and that long-term funding is required to help provide housing to the most vulnerable. Limited housing options in rural areas to age in place was also identified as an issue.

Through the survey and correspondence, residents expressed concern about food security in HRM. There was support for establishing resilient food systems as well as supporting a diversity of agricultural and food retail enterprises. Respondents expressed support for the work being done through JUSTFood.

Survey respondents identified that communications from the Municipality should use more clear, concise, and readable language. They expressed that there is a need to better inform residents about developments taking place in their communities and what opportunities exist to have their voices heard and listened to.



CELEBRATING CULTURE & HERITAGE

While there was not significant feedback provided on this topic, likely because of the ongoing Sharing Our Stories engagement, there was some interest from residents in preserving the heritage character of the region. In addition, requests were received to better protect and celebrate Mi'kmaq culture and heritage and provide stronger physical connections to Africville. Stakeholders also identified a need to clarify the role of the Municipality and Province in the protection of archaeological resources.



INTEGRATING COMMUNITY FACILITIES AND PARKS

There was significant interest and feedback across all engagement tools regarding public parks, with a particular focus on wilderness parks.

A strong, mobilized group of community organizations and residents voiced their desire to protect and expand wilderness parks in HRM, including Sandy Lake Regional Park, Blue Mountain Birch Cove Lakes Area and Purcell's Cove Backlands. Requests included preventing or postponing secondary planning and development in areas around wilderness parks, undertaking formal park planning for each area, requesting better policy tools for regulating development on private lands, establishing an open and collaborative approach for the acquisition of park lands, developing stewardship programs for wilderness parks and completing additional independent ecological and floodplain studies.

In addition to developing a cohesive approach to the acquisition, protection and maintenance of wilderness parks, submissions also strongly recommended that a region-wide parks strategy be developed. This regional parks strategy would detail the function, purpose, and timelines for park development and management across the municipality. This approach was supported by requests to adopt the Parks Spectrum identified by the Halifax Green Network Plan into policy and develop Level of Service Standards for parks in HRM. It was also recommended that access to parks be evaluated using an equity lens to consider historical lack of access to parks for underrepresented groups.



ENHANCING ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

In addition to advocating for the protection of wilderness parks for recreation purposes, the group of community organizations and residents identified the importance of these areas for environmental health. They identified the important role that these areas play in the protection of wildlife corridors, mitigation of climate change impacts, and maintenance of biodiversity.

There was significant support across all engagement tools for the continued implementation of the Halifax Green Network Plan. Concerns related to environmental protection included a need to establish more standardized and ambitious environmental policies, work with the Province to better protect wetlands, develop an approach to the protection of wildlife corridors, establish appropriate stormwater management standards, monitor and protect water quality, maintain the urban forest, and better regulate development in coastal areas.



LEADING THROUGH ACTION ON CLIMATE

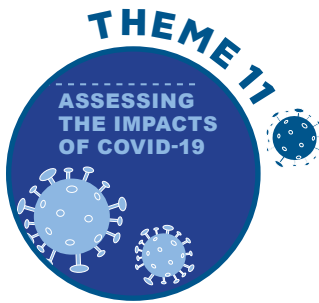
Through correspondence, stakeholder meetings and survey results, residents expressed strong concern about the impacts of climate change and the need to act. Residents noted the important environmental, health, and social impacts of climate change.

There was strong support throughout the engagement for the implementation of HalifACT and working towards more aggressive net-zero targets and mitigation strategies. It was suggested that community-based programs should be established and expanded to help support climate change initiatives.



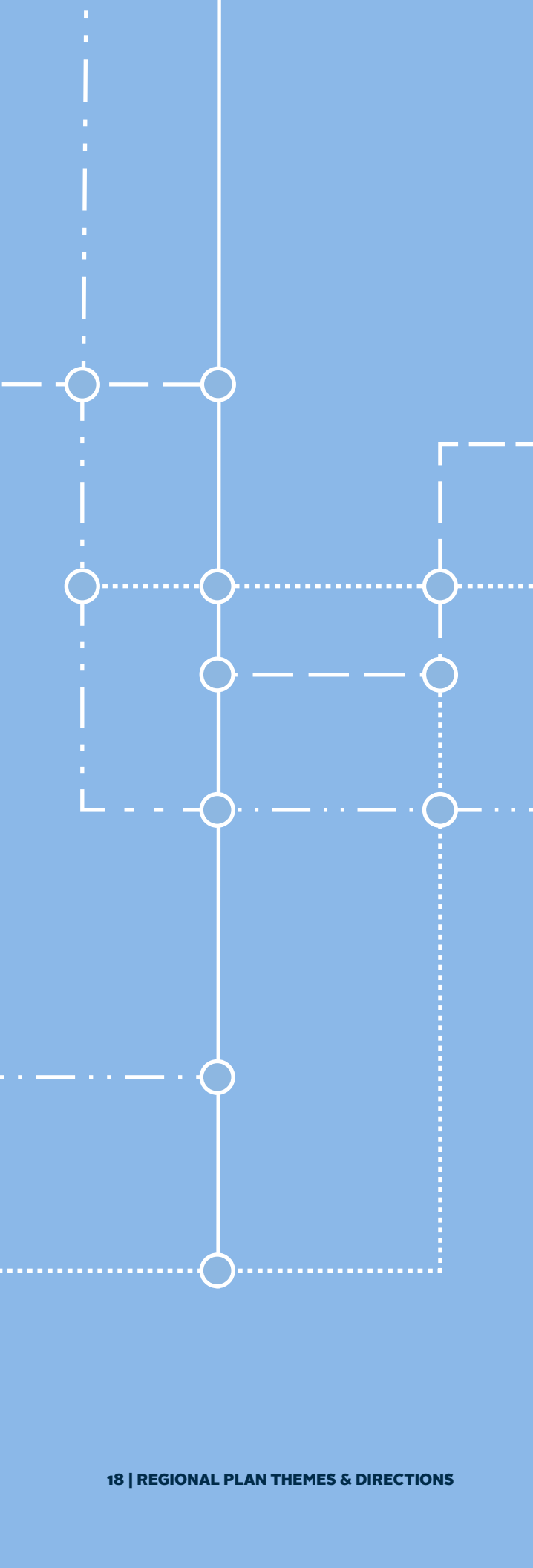
IMAGINING HRM INTO 2050 AND BEYOND

Survey responses identified housing affordability and protecting natural places and wildlife as the two biggest priorities for planning over the next 30 years. Respondents also expressed concern about the effects of development on watercourses, watersheds, and natural areas.



ASSESSING THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19

Survey respondents noted that the pandemic has demonstrated the importance of outdoor amenity space and access to nature. Several pieces of correspondence noted that wilderness parks are becoming stressed due to increased use during the pandemic and identified a need for enhanced park stewardship. Residents and stakeholders also identified that the pandemic may have impacted immigration and housing preferences and requested that this be considered when planning for the future. Continued economic relief for those most impacted by the pandemic was also requested.



SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

Public engagement is a key component of the planning process for the Regional Plan Review. The objective of the Themes & Directions phase of engagement was to provide for a fair, inclusive, and transparent process that builds on the engagement from previous functional plans to influence the proposed scope of the Regional Plan Review, as well as potential planning policies and regulations. The feedback received will be used to inform the Regional Plan Review process moving forward.

Given the varied stakeholders and resident groups potentially impacted, and the challenges posed by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic which prevented most in-person engagement from taking place, the engagement program relied on a variety of tools to share information and receive feedback on the Themes and Directions Report which will inform the development of proposed policies. The greater reliance on online engagement and surveys was supplemented by virtual stakeholder meetings, virtual Q&A events, email submissions, and personal calls. While a departure from a typical engagement process, the virtual process in some cases removed barriers and provided new opportunities for engagement. The feedback received was extensive and will inform changes in both policies and regulations.

The next phase of engagement for the Regional Plan Review is anticipated to take place in Winter-Spring 2022, following the release of the first draft of amendments to the Regional Plan. The goal of this phase of engagement will be to provide an overview of the draft document, highlighting the proposed major changes, and receive feedback. Detailed scheduling for the next phase of engagement will be released when available.