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REGIONAL PLAN REVIEW ISSUE PAPER

RURAL COMMUNITY PLANNING

HALIFAX

May 2021

INTRODUCTION

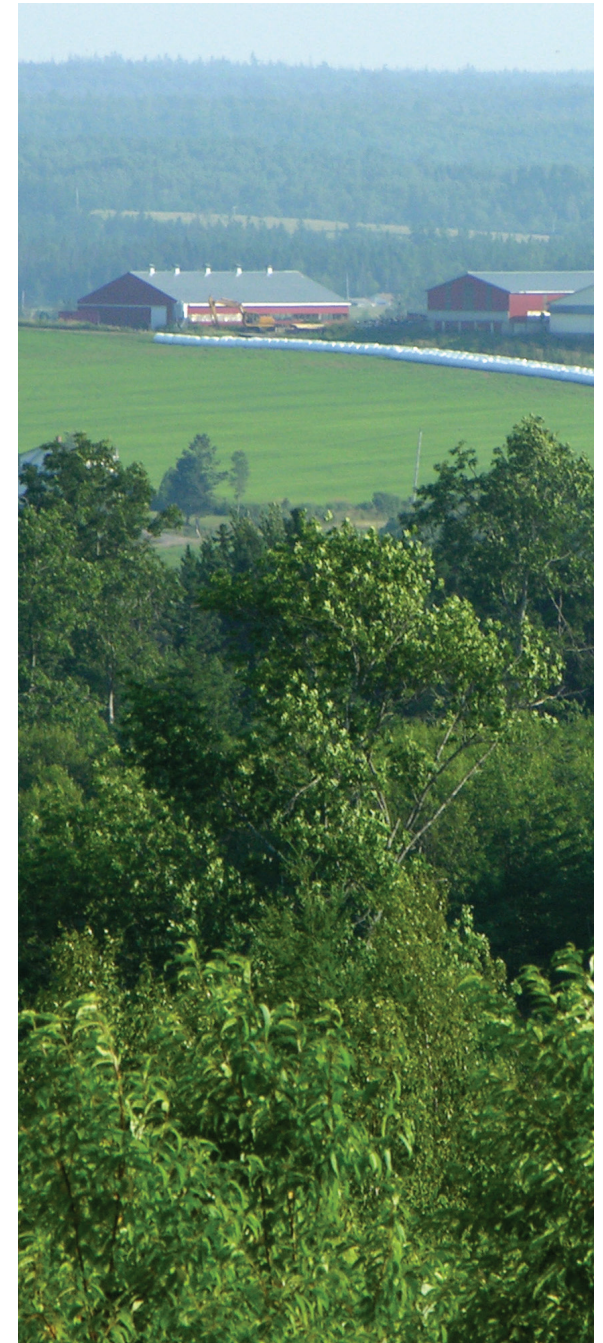
The Regional Plan sets out planning policy and regulations for three major geographic areas of the region – the Regional Centre, Suburban Communities and Rural Communities. The rural area is the largest and most geographically diverse, and HRM's strong rural communities are a critically important part of the region's success. The challenges and opportunities in HRM's rural areas are different from urban parts of the region, and they must be studied and planned for in a way that recognizes their distinct characteristics.

Residents value the balance between urban and rural lifestyles in HRM that few other large Canadian cities can offer. HRM's rural lands are not simply viewed as locations for future urbanization, but recognized for their ecological, economic, social and cultural values. Maintaining the integrity of rural land and communities is important to rural residents and a fundamental aspect of the Regional Plan. The Regional Plan Review provides an opportunity to think about how our urban and rural areas interact, how rural areas are supported to grow and change, and how rural residents' visions for the future of their communities can be realized.

Many of the community plans (called Secondary Municipal Planning Strategies) were completed before amalgamation. These plans

and their land use by-laws were developed with significant public input and continue to provide a solid foundation for planning in HRM's rural areas. Some communities have seen change since the time the plans were written, especially those on the edge of the urban area. As a result, some of the policy guidance and land use regulations no longer reflect the communities' visions. The existing plans and land use by-laws may allow uses that the community feels are no longer appropriate or restrict uses that the community would like to support. The Regional Plan and the Halifax Green Network Plan have also focused on stronger protections for the natural environment, and 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 "Rural Plan" that will build on existing community plans and provide updated policy and land use by-law regulations for the rural areas. The Regional Plan Review will begin this work by establishing a vision and objectives for the Rural Planning framework which will help guide rural development to 2031 and beyond. This document provides an initial overview of some key ideas to begin this work.



GROWTH IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

In the past, rural areas in HRM featured a linear development pattern comprising of large estate lots, long farm lots and smaller lots located near watercourses, the coast and highways, characteristic of traditional farming, resource and fishing activities of the Maritimes. Some areas within commuting distance of the urban core experienced significant residential development up to the 1990s. Before the Regional Plan was adopted in 2006, rural subdivision regulations allowed for dispersed development patterns, detracting from traditional rural character and raising concerns about increasing infrastructure costs, availability of water, a loss of open space, negative environmental impacts, and the maintenance of private roads.

The Regional Plan provided a clear future direction for sustainable growth within the rural areas of HRM. Objectives for growth in rural areas include:

Protecting Natural and Cultural Landscapes

Growth and development throughout HRM has been shaped by a network of open space that includes include all natural, working, recreational, built and cultural landscapes. This network of open space shapes the settlement pattern, provides natural resources that support the economy and preserves our culture and heritage. The Regional Plan's growth management policies are important to maintain to continue to protect the Green Network, including core ecological lands and corridors.



Supporting Working Landscapes

Many of HRM's rural communities were built around and continue to support traditional industries like farming, fishing and other natural resource activities. These working landscapes support rural economic activities, providing local resources for the region's food, construction and manufacturing sectors and contribute to natural landscape connectivity. Rural residential growth should be directed away from working landscapes to protect these industries and minimize potential conflict with any new residential development.



Directing Growth to Rural Centres

The Regional Plan identifies several rural centres based on historic development patterns, transportation connections and development opportunities. These rural centres are locations where development is clustered within and around existing built up areas to support local shops and services, maintain rural character and direct rural development away from more remote natural landscapes or resource lands. These areas will be reviewed to better understand how much new residential growth can be expected overall in rural areas, and how much growth should be directed to each rural centre. It will also be important to identify and distinguish between centres where significant new growth is expected, and smaller centres that will continue to serve as hubs for services.



RURAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

HRM's rural communities are diverse in terms of their geography, population density, and proximity to the urban core of the Municipality. As HRM grows, pressures on rural communities at the edge of the urban area threatens to change the traditional rural character of these areas. Residents in the rural commutershed close to the urban core experience very different lifestyles and economic opportunities and may require different services than those more distant from urban HRM, where natural resources are critically important to the economy. Objectives for rural community development include:

Planning for Different Types of Rural Communities

The existing Regional Plan sets out a series of growth centres envisioned at different scales, from town-sized communities such as Upper Tantallon, River-Lakes/Fall River, Porters Lake and Musquodoboit Harbour, to smaller village-sized communities including Hubbards, Tantallon Crossroads, Enfield and Lake Echo. The Regional Plan also identifies many other existing rural communities as service centres that support surrounding areas but are not expected to accommodate significant new housing development. Rural centres and more remote rural communities require consideration and planning for different types of services. Rural services like transportation, recreation, water/wastewater, internet connectivity, economic development opportunities and others should be considered with their specific rural context in mind. Planning for different types of rural settlement will help the Municipality to better plan for equitable service delivery for rural communities throughout the region.



Providing Options for Rural Mobility

Connecting rural communities is important for supporting rural economic viability and social equity. Rural mobility can be improved by clustering rural development in established centres, investing in strategic active transportation infrastructure, and expanding the Rural Transit Funding Program to improve rural mobility options. A range of rural mobility options are needed to serve the different types of rural communities. The Regional Plan identifies that the Municipality can assist with community-based transit services in rural areas, such as Halifax Transit's Rural Transit Funding Program. Consistent with the Integrated Mobility Plan, the Regional Plan Review will begin to study opportunities to improve rural mobility through alternatives to conventional transit, as called for by the Integrated Mobility Plan. This study will consider how rural mobility

is currently provided, travel demand patterns and rural travel needs, and best practices in comparable rural regions, and explore possible economic benefits such as the potential for carrying commercial light freight, encouraging rural tourism, giving students and aging residents the option of remaining in their home communities, and enabling urban non-drivers to visit rural destinations.

Identifying Rural Infrastructure Needs

Outside the Urban Service Area, the region's rural communities are serviced primarily with on-site services (septic and wells). Some rural communities have expressed a desire for centralized services due to concerns about local water quality and quantity. Other communities are interested growing their communities and feel that centralized services could boost rural economic development. Access to good quality potable water is critical

to community health and economic potential. In some places, Water Service Areas have been used to provide a centralized water distribution system and continue to use on-site sewage disposal systems; however, these systems can be expensive when the development pattern is dispersed. The existing Regional Plan outlines some alternatives to traditional central wastewater and water services, such as Wastewater Management Districts and private wastewater utilities for conservation design developments. The Regional Plan Review will begin to study these and other innovative solutions to understand how they might be used to encourage healthy, affordable rural community intensification and development. This study will form a starting point for considering potential locations where innovative rural sewage and water technologies might be applied.



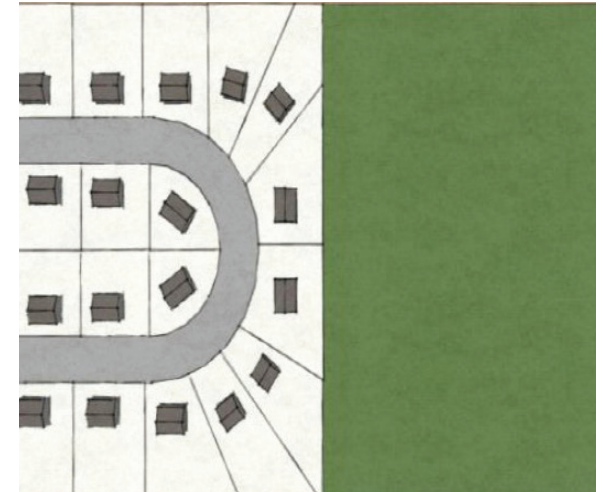
RURAL SITE CONTEXT AND DESIGN

An important part of rural planning is to recognize and support community character and rural lifestyles. The Regional Plan will direct land use regulations to help communities to maintain these special qualities, while allowing for new development in key locations. Objectives for rural site context and design include:

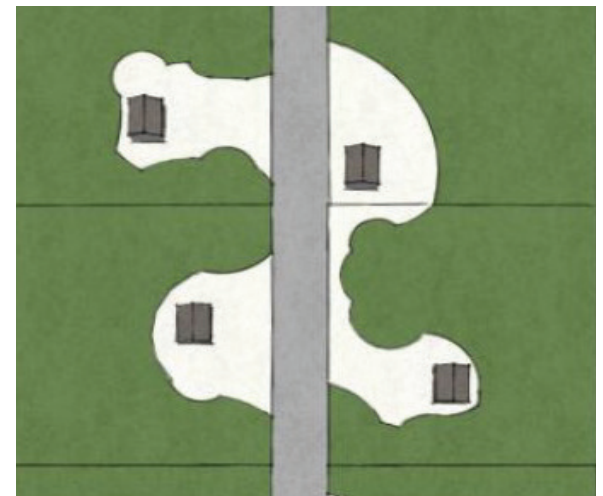
Conservation Design

Since 2006, the Regional Plan has permitted new large-scale rural housing developments only through the Conservation Design Development process. The conservation design approach is a creative form of subdivision designed to conserve environmentally sensitive features and culturally significant areas by clustering development on portions of the site that are more suitable for development. Maximum development densities ensure that development is environmentally sustainable and on-site services are capable of meeting residents' needs. Development proposals are required to submit detailed ground water studies and site analysis reports. Conservation design developments are permitted in most rural areas, with larger scale and higher density proposals only considered within identified rural growth centres. While existing conservation design development policies effectively

conserve open space within proposed developments, the Halifax Green Network Plan called for consideration of broader regional landscape patterns and connectivity. Because there have been very few applications for these developments in rural growth centres, rural growth in this form has been limited. The Regional Plan Review will consider opportunities to revise the existing policies to better achieve their intent. In the short term, this will involve making minor adjustments to the existing policy and regulations to ensure that the Conservation Design tool can be used more effectively for development. Future work will explore ways to allow more opportunities for as-of-right development within the rural growth centres.



Classic Conservation Design



Hybrid Conservation Design

Recognizing Rural Community Character

Each rural community has distinctive architectural styles, building forms, natural and cultural assets, and development patterns which give the area a sense of place, identity and character. Planning policies and regulations can work to ensure the scale, design and building form in new developments contribute to the overall character of rural communities. Parks, natural spaces, and historic resources should also be considered. When development is done in a contextually-sensitive way, new designs in rural areas can complement and build upon existing rural community character.



Providing a Diversity of Housing Forms

Single unit dwellings have been the predominant housing form in rural areas and in many places there are limited housing options in other forms. Demographic changes and increasing pressures on the housing market have created a need for a broader range of housing options in rural communities to accommodate residents' diverse needs. For example, older residents who wish to age in their communities may be unable to find apartment-style housing that typically requires less maintenance. Ensuring a range of housing types are available is important for attracting and retaining residents in rural communities.



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