Update on missing middle housing, mass timber and other amendments in the Regional Centre SMPS & LUB

What we heard report

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HALIFAX

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Acknowledgement

The engagement methods used, including the survey, pop-up events and emails were self-selecting methods. Participation was voluntary and open to anyone who chose to take part and was promoted widely through the Engage Halifax website, newsletter notifications, targeted advertising, in-person pop-up events and social media. Accordingly, the results reflect the perspectives of those who participated.

Industry engagement sessions for the missing middle housing and the mass timber and modular construction projects were invitation-based. Municipal employees identified relevant companies and industry experts through research, consulting other industry professionals and reviews of permit applications; the invitees represent a broad and diverse range of professionals from the development and design industries. This feedback reflects the perspectives of those who attended.

All feedback provides valuable insight and is one of several sources that will inform this work.

Planning process

On November 18, 2025, Halifax Regional Council initiated the Centre Plan 2026 updates to keep the Regional Centre's planning documents current and responsive to emerging trends and issues. The process includes a review of missing middle housing design requirements in the Established Residential (ER) zones, an assessment of built form requirements to support emerging building methods for housing and a routine administrative review.

Missing middle housing

Recent zoning changes under the Urgent Changes to Planning Documents for Housing process have created more opportunities for new missing middle housing. The updated zoning framework permits up to four units on most properties in the Centre Plan area, with up to eight units for new construction allowed in the ER-3 zone, depending on lot size. However, observed trends and early community feedback indicate that a closer look at zoning rules is needed to make sure new missing middle homes contribute positively to the character of existing neighbourhoods. The Halifax Regional Municipality (the municipality) is reviewing the urban design rules for new missing middle housing in areas zoned Established Residential (e.g. ER-2 and ER-3) zones.

Emerging building methods

Emerging methods such as mass timber and manufactured/modular housing can provide benefits such as a lower carbon footprint, shorter onsite building timelines and support for local industries. These methods are recognized by multiple levels of government and industry experts as efficient options for improving housing supply. Historically, zoning rules have been created around conventional construction methods and materials, such as steel and concrete. It can be challenging for new methods to achieve the built form (i.e. size, shape and design of new buildings) required by zoning rules. The municipality is reviewing ways to reduce built form barriers to emerging building methods

This document

This document summarizes the engagement activities and feedback received for the missing middle housing and emerging building methods components of the Centre Plan 2026 updates.

The summarized feedback section provides an overview of the feedback and ideas collected through pop-up events, an online survey, email submissions and industry engagement sessions. Feedback is organized into key themes that emerged throughout the engagement process. Blue text boxes within this section highlight quotes from participants.

The next steps section briefly outlines the upcoming stages of the planning process and future engagement opportunities.

How we engaged

This section summarizes the engagement activities for both projects. Public engagement and outreach statistics for the missing middle housing project are accurate as of June 1, 2026.

Public engagement – Missing middle housing



Online survey

An online survey was available on the Engage Halifax website from May 1 to June 1, 2026. Participants answered several questions about missing middle housing, particularly their concerns, preferences, opinions on building features and the proposed changes related to missing middle housing. The survey received 1,346 responses.



Pop-up events

Municipal staff hosted four pop-up events including on May 7 at the Alderney Ferry Terminal, on May 9 at the Alderney Landing Market, on May 11 at the Halifax Central Library and on May 13 at the Dalhousie Student Union Building. During these events, residents were able to view illustrations on potential design changes for missing middle housing and had the opportunity to share feedback and concerns with municipal staff.



Email correspondence

Residents could also share feedback by way of email. Staff analyzed the feedback from 28 emails received by June 1, 2026.

Outreach and promotion



Project website

The project webpage on Engage Halifax provided background information, information on engagement opportunities, fact sheets, and link to the survey. Between



Social media

Engagement opportunities were promoted through the Planning and Development Facebook page, Bluesky and paid Meta advertising. Paid ads generated 1,192

May 1 and May 31, 2026, the page recorded 6,698 views and 310 document downloads.

Industry engagement



Missing middle housing industry workshop

This workshop brought together architects, engineers, developers, planners and non-profit organizations with experience in missing middle housing design. Municipal staff presented the project background and potential design changes, and participants shared their experience and suggestions for refining land use regulations and urban design requirements.



Modular construction industry engagement session

This session brought together industry professionals involved in modular construction. Participants shared feedback on the proposed changes and the broader challenges facing the industry.

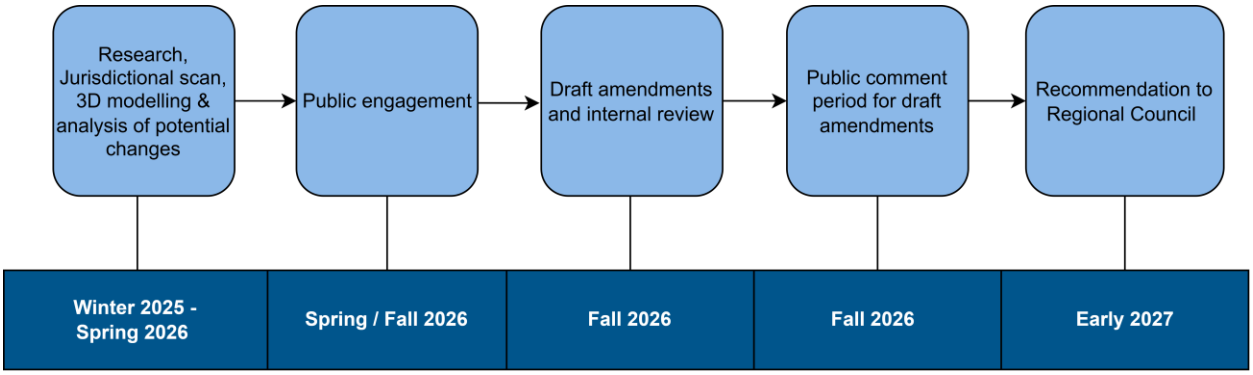
landing page views, while three Facebook posts received 9,625 views.



Mass timber industry engagement

These discussions brought together industry professionals involved in mass timber construction. Participants shared feedback on the proposed changes, the advantages of this building method and the broader challenges facing the industry.

Project timeline



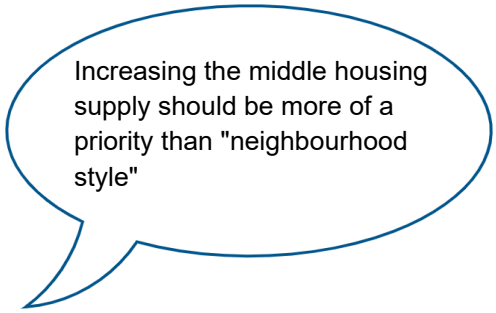
Summarized feedback - Missing middle housing

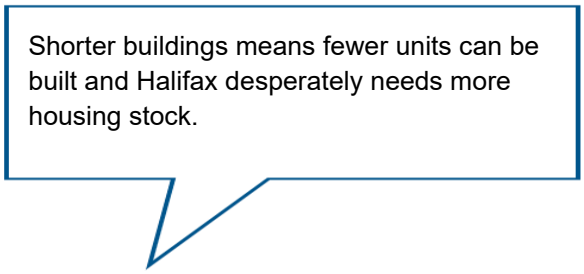
Housing supply, affordability and development feasibility

Participants discussed both the outcomes they hoped the proposed changes would achieve and their concerns about them. Many participants hoped to see much more housing built, with a wider mix of housing types. Smaller homes were seen as important for supporting aging in place and offering more affordable options for low-income residents.

Many were concerned about:

- combined effects of lower heights, reduced lot coverage, larger setbacks, unit limits and additional design controls would reduce the amount of housing that could be built. A few felt this would be a step back from recent changes to planning documents to increase housing supply. They mentioned that aesthetics and character should not override the need for housing;
- new design regulations could add consultation time and costs, making some projects financially unviable; and
- capping internal conversions at eight units was seen as illogical when the exterior is unchanged and codes are met. In their view, this blocks affordable gentle density. Limits on rear additions could lead owners to demolish the existing building or to add height to it before proposing an addition.





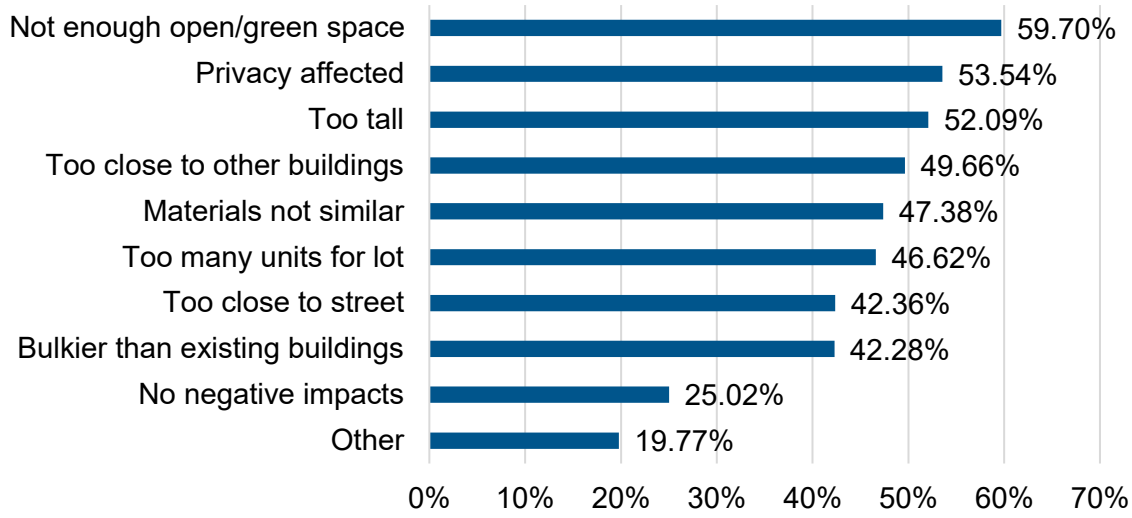
Building design & character

Building design and character was the most discussed topic of the engagement for missing middle housing. Many participants felt recent buildings are bland, boxy and lack character. Concerns included the following:

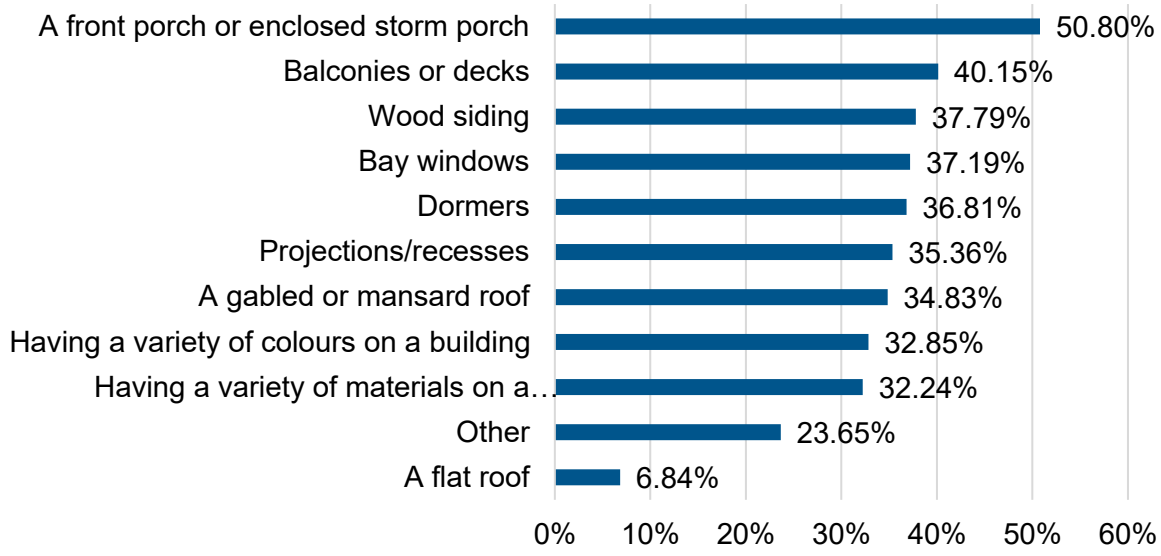
Recent buildings	• Visually dominant, poorly proportioned or out of place among surrounding homes. • Black, grey and white siding, flagstone and aluminum panels are overused and repetitive are boring. • Some materials look cheap and buildings are maximized on their lots.
Preferred design features	• More colour, brick, sloped roofs, traditional windows, porches, dormers, bay windows and roof variation, small New York–style balconies, street-facing entrances, higher-quality materials, fewer blank walls, integrated landscaping and human-scale design at ground level. • Four to five storey buildings that fit in the neighbourhood and well-designed townhouses with two to three bedrooms.
Setbacks and lot coverage	• Views were mixed. Some supported lower lot coverage and larger setbacks for light, privacy and landscaping and wanted backyard suites counted toward lot coverage. Others felt three metre side setbacks are too wide, suggested allowing zero lot line setbacks or felt front setbacks should be optional.
Design regulation	• Views were divided. Some felt detailed design rules are unnecessary and needs flexibility. In their view, the best way to improve design is to build more housing, so buyers and renters can avoid unattractive buildings and builders are pushed to do better. Others supported flexibility only with stronger review and enforcement.
Heritage	• Participants were concerned that older and heritage buildings are being demolished too quickly.

As shown in the two graphics below, survey participants were most concerned about loss of green space, privacy impacts and tall buildings. The most popular building features included front or enclosed porches, balconies or decks and wood siding.

Concerns about missing middle housing design



Preffered building features for missing middle housing



Height, scale and density

Participants frequently treated building height, footprint, depth, lot coverage, setbacks and unit count as a single issue: whether a development's overall scale suits its surrounding context. A common view was that design details may improve a building's appearance but cannot fix one that is simply too big for its context and scale should respond to neighbouring homes.

Common concerns included:

- four-storey buildings or wide/bulky buildings being out-of-scale with the existing context – some suggested three storeys was more appropriate;
- loss of sunlight from larger buildings;
- too many units on small lots; and
- limited separation from neighbouring properties, including from "non-conforming" setbacks.

However, these concerns were not one-dimensional. Views on the amount of density were varied. Some felt that the density permitted under the Housing Accelerator Fund (HAF) changes was too much. Others strongly supported density, saying neighbourhood character should not take priority over housing.

Some opposed allowing non-conforming setbacks, arguing that substantially rebuilt or larger buildings should follow the same setback rules as other new developments.

Many supported greater height or density along major streets and transit corridors, in commercial areas, on larger lots and next to existing larger buildings.

> University neighbourhoods are becoming overpopulated. We do not need more density on the peninsula. People should live outside the city where it is more affordable and commute via transit.

> Even if the primary structure is reduced in size the backyard suite structure ends up filling the overall lot…..I don't think residents refuse backyard suites, rather the overall lot coverage and massing.

Green space and environmental sustainability

Participants saw green space as essential infrastructure, not just decoration. Many described it as an important part of neighbourhood character. They said new units need access to green and outdoor space, including yards, gardens and space for pets and children's play. Participants linked trees, vegetation, permeable surfaces and usable outdoor areas with:

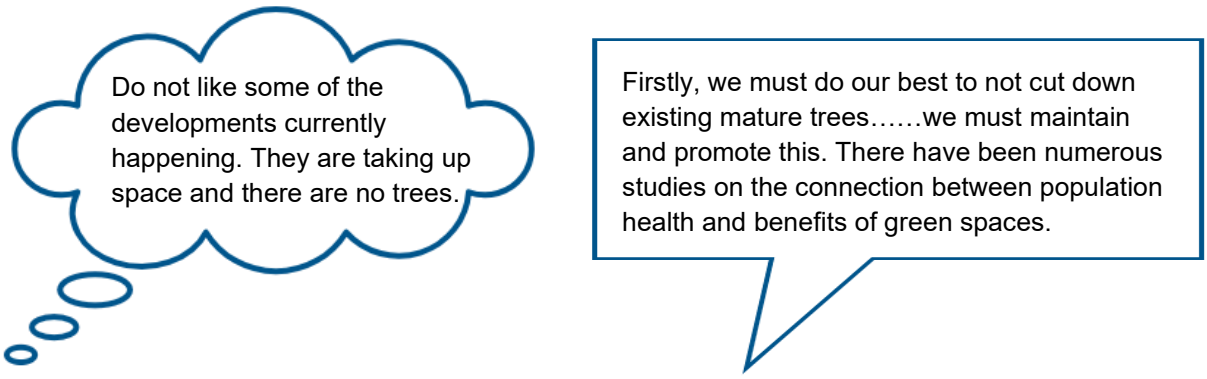
- stormwater absorption and reduced runoff and flooding;
- urban cooling, shade and a reduced heat island effect;
- biodiversity and pollinator habitat;
- air quality;
- mental health and access to nature;
- neighbourhood interaction; and
- a softer transition between large buildings and the street.

Loss of trees was a common concern. Participants noted that trees are being removed for high-rises and rear additions and that some recent developments leave no room for trees. Some supported reducing lot coverage to retain more trees.

Other suggestions included:

- limits on paved and other impervious surfaces;
- permeable paving and rain gardens; and
- native, drought-resistant and pollinator plantings.

Some also supported green building standards. Multiple participants wanted green roofs, including rooftop gardens and amenity space. Others suggested LEED or similar sustainability standards and solar requirements for new housing.



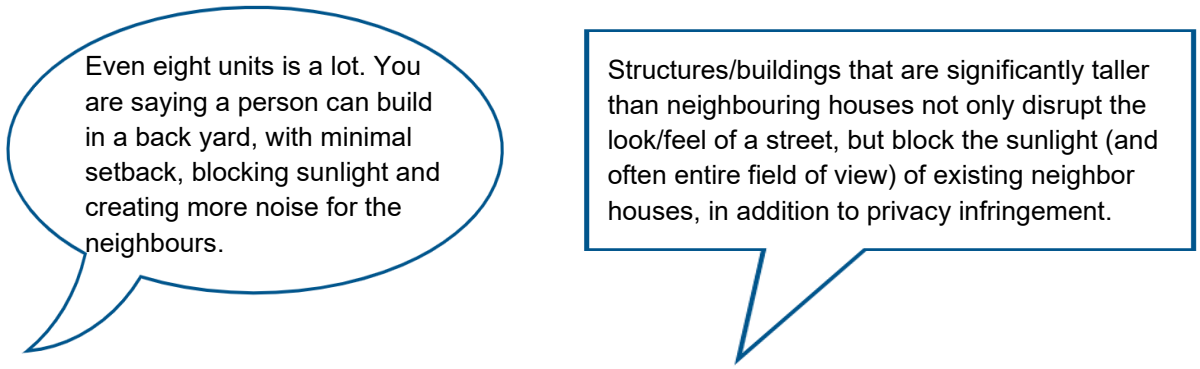
Impacts on neighbouring properties: privacy, sunlight, noise and safety

Privacy was a common concern. Some felt the rules focus too much on how buildings look from the street and not enough on their impacts on neighbouring properties. Participants were particularly concerned about:

- upper-storey windows overlooking neighbouring yards and homes;
- balconies, decks and exterior stairs facing private outdoor areas;
- new buildings located close to property lines;
- several households overlooking a property that previously bordered only one;
- more noise from balconies, outdoor stairs, vehicles and larger numbers of occupants;
- new buildings close to property lines, which participants linked not only to privacy but also to fire spread, evacuation, and emergency and maintenance access.

Suggested solutions include:

- encouraged courtyard-style blocks;
- larger setbacks;
- reduced height or massing;
- inset rather than projecting balconies;
- landscaping, trees, fencing or privacy screens; and
- restrictions on exterior stair and balcony placement.



Enforcement

Some public dissatisfaction was aimed less at the written rules than at how development is approved, built, occupied and maintained.

Common enforcement related concerns include:

- inspections being limited or not responding to resident concerns;
- building management, maintenance and state-of-repair;
- construction debris from demolition and construction;
- lots being vacant for long periods of time;
- notification for demolition and construction to neighbours;
- managing street and sidewalk closures;
- responsibility for drainage, excavation and other construction impacts; and
- solid waste management including storage, proper disposal on collection days, and ensuring animals do not become an issue.

> …..the current execution is severely lacking in oversight regarding design standards and public safety. Specifically, the performance-based approach to setbacks and unit density has created a massive loophole for developers, resulting in properties that resemble haphazard "tenements" rather than thoughtful, missing-middle housing.

> I understand that HRM planning is now trying to tighten up the development rules, which I applaud. I don't think that the proposed adjustments to the rules go far enough...The proposed adjustments to the development rules are similarly not tight enough to prevent subsequent missteps.

Parking and transportation

Parking was one of the common and most divided issues. The disagreement went beyond more parking versus less. Views also differed on whether parking should be required or how many spaces should be provided, whether parking needs should vary by neighbourhood, whether transit is good enough to support less parking and where parking should go; underground, behind buildings, screened, shared or off-site.

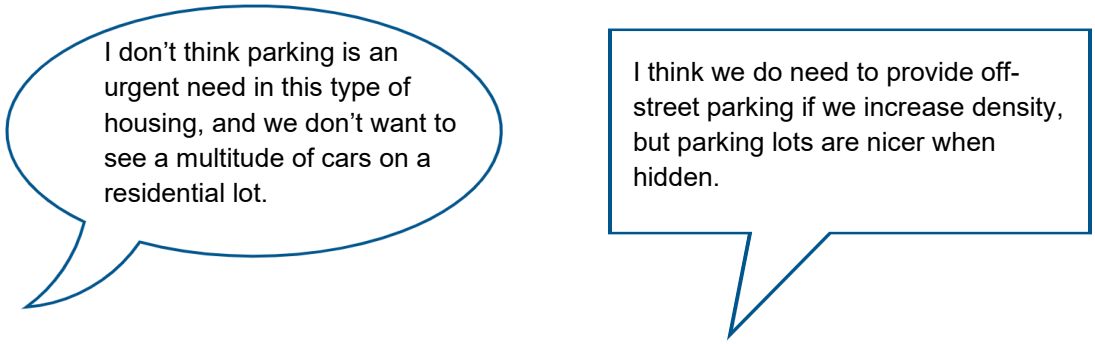
Common concerns included:

- parking should be required because transit service is not reliable enough;
- lack of parking in development pushes cars onto streets resulting in illegal parking and snow clearing issues;
- accessibility issues with caregivers, service workers and people with mobility needs forced to walk longer distances to access homes;
- requiring parking would add costs to housing, reduce green space, increase urban heat island effects and discourage transit use.

Suggestions included:

- setting parking requirements based on a system that considers the number of units in a development and transit access;
    - recognizing missing middle housing as a transportation solution rather than an issue. Locating development in areas serviced by transit results in less people have to drive into the city, reducing congestion.
- a need for improved transit, cycling and walking infrastructure and better road safety overall; and
- reducing or removing parking minimums.

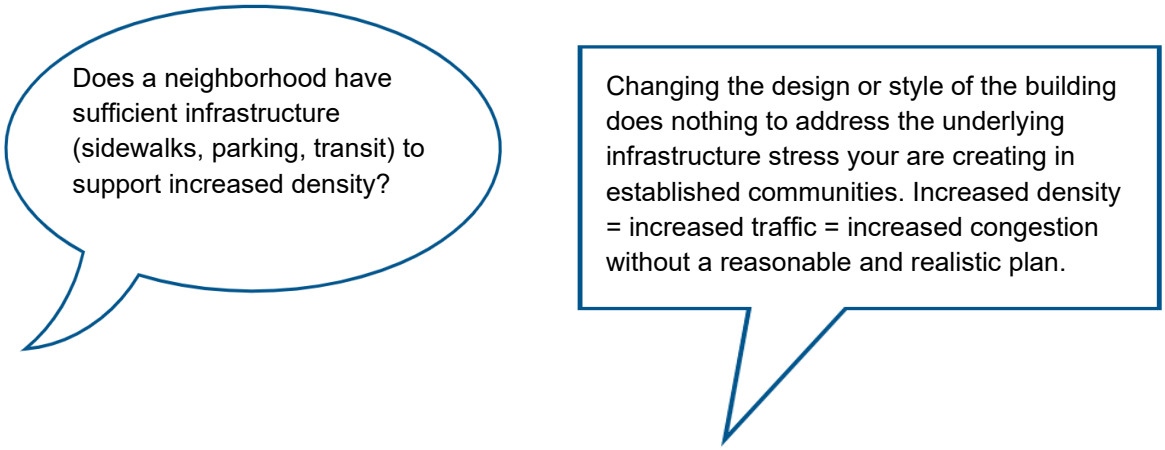
Many did not oppose parking itself but objected to front-yard or visually dominant surface parking. They preferred options such as, underground, internal or rear-yard parking, screening and permeable surfaces, fewer curb cuts, landscaping between parking and the street, allowing parking without a uniform minimum.



Infrastructure

Many questioned whether infrastructure and services can keep up with new density. Concerns included road capacity, transit service, water pressure, sewer and stormwater systems, schools and health services, parks and recreation, evacuation and emergency access.

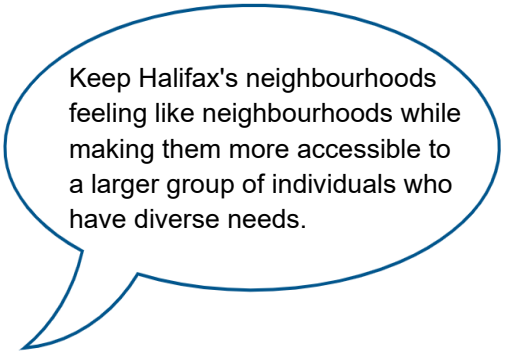
Some felt their neighbourhood already has enough housing diversity and density and worried about oversupply and strain on infrastructure. Others supported more housing but wanted infrastructure investment to come before or alongside new density, such as reviewing road capacity before approving new developments. Some argued that infrastructure pressure should be managed through development charges or greater developer contributions rather than by limiting housing.



Accessibility and aging in lace

Accessibility came up less often as a topic but was a clear concern, especially for seniors who want to age in place. Participants said wheelchair-accessible housing is hard to find and called for more housing options for seniors and residents with mobility needs. They preferred having:

- more accessible units, including thorough accessibility requirements;
- ground-oriented units at grade, which make accessible units easier to provide;
- elevators for units on the second floor and above, which some felt should be required;
- interior corridor access instead of exterior stairs, which are difficult for older residents;
- safe, continuous sidewalks and protected pedestrian routes during construction; and
- parking and drop-off areas for people with disabilities.





Industry engagement

Mass timber and modular construction

Mass timber

The following summarizes feedback received through the industry engagement session and email correspondence, including feedback on the proposal to permit tall mid-rise buildings up to 12 storeys in certain areas of the Regional Centre.

- Participants supported increasing the maximum height for tall mid-rise, encapsulated mass timber buildings from 10 to 12 storeys in certain zones. They noted earlier Centre Plan changes, including measuring height in storeys instead of metres, has already been helpful.
- Regional Centre regulations treat buildings over 10 stories as high-rise which require larger setbacks and smaller floor plates, making it challenging to economically build mass timber buildings as the floor plates are smaller than tall mid-rise buildings.
- Most buildings in the region rely on concrete, which depends on formwork labour that is already at capacity. Encouraging mass timber could help ease this constraint. Industry knowledge is growing through training and partnerships.
- Additional floor area would improve project viability. Stepbacks add cost and reduce floor area, although participants agreed this applies to all construction types and is not unique to mass timber as a construction technology.
- Streetwall design requirements, such as glazing and facade treatments, have not been a significant challenge for mass timber construction.
- Most mass timber buildings are six storeys or less, and there are currently no tall mass timber buildings in the region.
- Many felt that planning policy is only a small part of the challenge. Challenges outside the scope of planning include, higher material and production costs, limited local production, developer familiarity with concrete and seeing mass timber as riskier, transportation availability and cost, higher insurance costs and moisture, fire and acoustic performance.
- Government programs promoting mass timber could increase demand faster than Atlantic Canada's limited production capacity can respond.

- Participants suggested:
    - Reviewing policies regularly to keep pace with changes to the Nova Scotia Building Code Regulations;
    - Removing unnecessary planning barriers and creating a clear, predictable permitting pathway;
    - Density bonus and incentive calculations;
        - Adopting a wood-first approach and procurement scoring that favours mass timber;

- Requiring carbon calculations for public buildings;
- Using carbon policies such as HalifACT, or Toronto's Green Standard.
    - Sustained government demand and funding to support local manufacturing
    - Pursuing a municipal demonstration project.

Modular construction

The following summarizes feedback received through the industry engagement session and email correspondence.

- Participants identified speed as the main benefit of modular construction and cost as the top priority. They suggested weighing each design requirement against the cost it adds.
- Views on design requirements were divided. Many felt articulation requirements add cost and slow construction. They preferred a suite of design options, such as colour, materials, landscaping, porches and rooflines, with exceptions for smaller buildings. Others cautioned that removing basic requirements could reinforce the stigma of modular buildings as low-quality or temporary buildings.
- Narrow lots that can accommodate townhouse-style modular units are not permitted under current minimum lot frontage and area requirements and have required site-specific approvals. Narrow lots keep costs down.
- Restrictions on front- and flanking-yard parking and garage width rules pose challenges for certain designs of modular units.
- Modular construction requires a flat, precisely graded site and lot grading rules should be reviewed to support this.
- For multi-unit buildings, most challenges relate to the building code rather than land use rules. Fire safety requirements, such as window placement, add costs and interior corridors/staircases require customizing modules. Exterior stairs avoid this but can dominate the view from the street. Meeting CSA standards in lieu of building code requirements has not been worthwhile for small projects and results in duplicate inspections anyway.
- Amenity space requirements add cost, and participants suggested reducing or allowing it to be provided outdoors.
- Participants suggested a streamlined approval process for modular buildings. They noted that the municipality's crane and road closure permit process has worked well.
- Procurement focuses on lowest cost rather than faster delivery and without a steady project pipeline, manufacturers cannot lower costs. Participants suggested that governments prioritize modern methods of construction in procurement and commit to purchasing modular units.

Next steps

The next steps of the planning process include the following:

- Fall 2026 engagement: The public will be invited to review and provide feedback on the proposed changes, which were informed by earlier engagement, research and analysis.
- Revisions: Staff will be considering revisions to the draft planning policies and regulations based on the feedback received.
- Regional Council review: The amendments will be presented to Council for first reading in 2027. Regional Council must hold a public hearing before deciding whether to approve the amendments.
- The public will be notified of any updates through the project website.