

## Is HRM's Affordable Housing Work Plan Actually Working?

Before exploring this question, let me share some experiences from my world of work over the last 18 months:

1. In terms of financial contributions per capita being invested in affordable housing, Halifax Regional Municipality lags behind other municipal governments in Atlantic Canada.
2. In New Brunswick, some local economic development organizations oversee affordable housing. In addition to attracting federal financing into their communities, they are targeting housing needs related to their local economies. For example, Expansion Dieppe, which is the economic development agency for the City of Dieppe, is pursuing a mixed-income housing strategy as the foundation for its downtown business plan. The Miramichi Economic Development Department is addressing affordable housing supply to help maintain its successful track record on immigration.
3. St. John's made a commitment to affordable housing in 2010. With a population less than one-third that of HRM, the City owns and operates 476 affordable housing units. With 6 staff, the Non-Profit Housing Division of the Community Services Department manages the housing portfolio, leads the implementation of the City's 10-year affordable housing strategy. St. John's is a member of the collaborative End Homelessness St. John's initiative, which has 9 dedicated staff. The City is part of a 2021 collaborative investigation to address seniors housing needs.

In May of 2020, I conducted a survey of Dartmouth residents (N=311) and only 7% felt HRM was doing a good job on affordable housing... 63% felt HRM's efforts need to be improved.

The Province of New Brunswick has undertaken a review of affordable housing best practices in Canada, and from our region, only Charlottetown and St. John's made that list. An important finding is the concept of "local housing ecosystems" replacing the previous housing continuum:

- 1) Local housing ecosystems need to be understood.
- 2) Strong local leadership is needed.

HRM has not updated its 2015 Housing Needs Assessment and therefore lacks knowledge about its local housing ecosystems.

### *HRM does not understand its local housing ecosystems*



Non-profit housing providers are key players in addressing community housing needs.

On the Dartmouth side of the harbour, there are an estimated 16 non-profit housing providers. Here's what we don't know about them:

- Who they serve and what housing needs they have
- How many units they own or manage
- Whether they have any available land
- How they collaborate within the housing sector and with the wider community, and
- The types of housing supports they offer and the challenges they face in delivering those services.

Here are my observations about affordable housing and Halifax Regional Municipality:

- HRM started its research into its affordable housing needs in 2004 and after a very lengthy period of time adopted the Affordable Housing Work Plan in 2018.
- The Work Plan is not a strategy or a business plan, in other words, it does not spell out what should be done, when, and by whom. No monitoring or reporting protocols are included.
- Reports listed in the 2018 Work Plan have not been completed.
- HRM does not track its housing needs.
- HRM is apparently unwilling to deal with costly regional development charges which are detrimental to the construction of new non-profit housing units.

HRM's Affordable Housing Work Plan isn't working and the main reasons are a lack of financial commitment and the need for a more effective organizational framework that responds to community needs.

Community councils provide an ideal forum for addressing local housing ecosystems.

Section 25 of the HRM Charter suggests that community councils are under-utilized and that they can play a range of roles in addressing community needs. In my survey of Dartmouth residents, 44% want the Harbour East Marine Drive Community Council to oversee affordable housing and another 30% would support that role if that was cost-effective to do so.

The advantages of using the community council system to help address affordable housing are (1) regular involvement of HRM councillors in addressing housing needs in their communities (2) involving planning staff more directly in the challenges of building affordable housing (3) engaging the public as per the Section 25 of the HRM Charter (4) helping to build community capacity, and (5) developing better knowledge of local housing ecosystems.

Like the actual building of a house, HRM's response to affordable housing needs to be built from the ground up.

There is nothing stopping HRM from addressing the affordable housing needs of its citizens and communities, except for a lack of commitment to do so.

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