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Item No. 15.1.2
Halifax Regional Council
April 29, 2025

TO: Mayor Fillmore and Members of Halifax Regional Council
FROM: Cathie O'Toole, Chief Administrative Officer
DATE: November 12, 2024
SUBJECT: Proactive Vegetation Management Program

ORIGIN

June 18, 2024 Regional Council motion (Item No. 16,1)

Request for Consideration from Councillor Cuttell

MOVED by Councillor Cuttell, seconded by Councillor Stoddard

THAT Halifax Regional Council direct the Chief Administrative Officer to prepare a staff report with recommendations for a proactive vegetation management program for walkways, pathways, and trails that support active transit connections within communities

MOTION PUT AND PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.

Not present: Councillors Smith, Cleary, Morse

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Halifax Regional Municipality boasts an extensive Active Transportation (AT) network that includes sidewalks, multi-use Trails, and supporting facilities such as trails, pathways, and walkways. While these assets are mapped and cataloged in the Asset Registry, maintenance responsibility falls to several business units depending on the facility's location and use. Service level agreements between business units govern maintenance responsibility.

No proactive vegetation management program exists for any structure except for Canadian National Rail crossings and the Cyclical Street Tree Pruning Program, which only focuses on planted trees within the right of way (ROW). Currently, AT network vegetation is managed reactively, guided by 311 requests. This reactive approach can lead to vegetation impeding the AT network.

The quantity and magnitude of AT facilities across HRM make the prospect of a cyclical, proactive maintenance model a resource-heavy consideration. Management of road infrastructure in the ROW entails proactive inspection, tracking, service standards and backlog management. Care of other assets falls to existing operations teams internally or within the state of good repair budget as a component of annual business planning and Council approval. This report recommends supporting the Asset Maintenance Responsibility Project to clarify asset ownership of AT facilities by business unit; inspecting AT facilities not currently within scope of the Public Works Right of Way inspection program; and continued development of the Parks maintenance program for non-turf vegetation adjacent trails.

RECOMMENDATION

That Halifax Regional Council direct the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to:

1. Develop an inspection program for AT connections not currently within scope of Public Works Right-of-Way inspection program, including support of the Asset Management Internal Maintenance Responsibility project
2. Continue development of the formal, proactive maintenance program for non-turf vegetation adjacent to trails on Parkland

BACKGROUND

The Making Connections: Active Transportation Priorities Plan 2014-2019 was approved by Regional Council in 2014. This plan was a follow-up to the 2006 Active Transportation Plan, with the goals of integrating all active transportation infrastructure and ensuring that the needs of all active transportation users were being met.

The Urban Forest Management Plan, adopted by Council in 2013 and the guiding document for matters related to trees and vegetation on Municipally controlled lands, speaks to Active Transportation, including the specific action:

A28. Improve urban forest conditions around active transportation networks and use the urban forest to increase active transportation opportunities.

Multi-use trails (otherwise known as Multi-Use Pathways or MUPs) are defined as 3-4 metre wide corridors for walking, cycling, and other active transportation modes. Their surface may be asphalt, concrete, gravel, or crusher dust. They are separated from other transportation modes and may be in the right-of-way, parks, provincial crown land, other public lands, or private land over which an easement is secured.

As of 2024, there are 248.38km of multi-use pathways (MUPs) in HRM. HRM maintains 113.53 kms; while volunteer Trail Associations maintain the remainder of the Active Transportation MUP Regional Network with support from HRM's AT Grant Programs. Most of these facilities are located on Provincial land (typically on abandoned rail corridors, K-roads or provincial parks). The multi-use pathways maintained by HRM are typically within the HRM right-of-way or parkland and are built by HRM or as part of a development agreement with no community association involvement.

Active transportation facilities that support multiple uses include walkways, pathways, and trails. These facilities are currently categorized within the HRM Asset Registry and are defined as:

Walkways - Constructed to formal standards, walkways are improved hard surfaces (usually asphalt) for non-motorized travel only, where the intended use is to get from one location to another. Walkways have a minimum width of 1.8 meters. This includes corridors connecting one street to another but is not exclusive to this. *(NOTE: In this definition, any asphalt travelways in a park would be considered a walkway).*

Pathways – Typically, an informal path (may be exceptions) that can be soft or hard surface material. The intended use is utilitarian, typically meandering within a park, and is usually shorter in distance than a trail.

Trails – An “at grade” hard or soft surface travel way used for non-motorized modes of transportation, Trails are recreational in nature and form part of the overall park and open space network (cannot be within the ROW).

For all assets owned and maintained by HRM, maintenance of the above asset classes varies by business units. Determination of the responsible business unit is based on several factors including HRM property classification on which the asset resides and/or the intended purpose of the facility. For most supporting AT facilities, maintenance is primarily the responsibility of the Public Works or Parks &

Recreation Business Units; however, some assets fall within the purview of Property Fleet & Environment or the Halifax Regional Centre for Education.

Many AT facilities run through or adjacent to natural areas or areas without a vegetation management program. Naturally occurring vegetation may grow into the travel portion of these AT facilities, reducing usability and creating safety concerns due to impeded sightlines. Across most supporting AT facilities within the scope of HRM maintenance, current vegetation maintenance activities are reactive in nature, driven by service requests from the community, staff-initiated work orders or other processes such as Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design CPTED or Women's Safety Assessment. Table 1.1 highlights the total length of each asset class. Street-to-street pathways are not currently a separate asset class; therefore, the exact length is unknown.

Table 1.1 Length of asset class by linear meters, summarized by HRM property classification

Asset Code	ROW (m)	Parks (m)	Other (m)	Totals (m)
Walkways	31495	50550	8946	90991
Multi-use Trail	27475	56216	5188	88879
Trail	3928	123573	26142	153643
Pathway	347	16277	1067	17691

DISCUSSION

Public Works

The management of vegetation in the ROW impacting sightlines, guide rails or other infrastructure is performed by the Infrastructure Maintenance & Operations (IMO) department of Public Works. Vegetation management is identified and reported through 311 or by email to Customer Contact Services. If requested or necessary, an inspection is performed on the facility to determine the priority of the remediation.

Via the IMO/Park Service Level Agreement, IMO is also responsible for street-to-street walkways, which are defined as those walkways that connect two streets, whether within HRM right-of-way or within HRM parkland. The term 'Street-to-street Connection' is utilized by Public Works and Parks and may refer to what the Asset Registry defines as a trail, pathway or walkway. Inspection of Street-to-Street Connections is not within the scope of the current ROW Inspection Program and is primarily driven by 311 service requests. All inventoried walkways, pathways and trails on Parkland that do not fall under the definition of a Street-to-Street Connection are the responsibility of the Parks & Recreation BU to maintain.

Inventory / Asset Management

The Asset Registry includes all AT Facilities; however, the designation of the Business Unit responsible for maintenance sometimes is not.

Analysis of Maintenance data from 2018 indicates 3,617 service requests for vegetation maintenance within the ROW, 233 of which are clearly related to trails, pathways, or walkways. 397 work orders were created in the same period, with between 30% and 40% associated with street-to-street walkways.

Between the 23/24 and 24/25 fiscal years, Council approved an increase to the Public Works budget for a total of \$450,000 to address vegetation, which included new areas received through the 2021 Road Transfer and includes corridor widening, roadside flail mowing, and vegetation maintenance for streets, sidewalks and walkways. Most of these funds are used to address Priority 1 maintenance issues, while the remainder of the funds are used to address requests for vegetation management received throughout the year or the backlog of Priority 2 roadside vegetation maintenance requests. With the additional increase to

the budget for the 24/25 fiscal year, the backlog has been reduced from 226,000 (2023) to 25,000 lane meters. Considering the two-year average of an additional 225,000 lane meters added annually, this budget should permit the elimination of the backlog by the end of fiscal 25/26.

Infrastructure Management

In 2024, [Eagle Engineering was awarded an RFP](#), which included an assessment of all walkway hardscapes within the asset registry and identifying areas where vegetation control may be required due to factors relating to accessibility or safety. This would include heavy tree or shrub growth within 1 meter of the walkway or 2.5 meters overhead. Trails or pathways are out of the scope of this project. The report is expected in 2025.

This data will be used to implement work to mitigate existing safety concerns. However, this data may not cover all Street-to-street walkways, as some may be categorized in the registry as trails or pathways.

Proactive Inspection & Maintenance Options

A proactive maintenance program for Street-to-street Connections, including AT facilities within the ROW, could take the form of a regular cyclical maintenance model, similar to Urban Forestry's cyclical street tree pruning program. Alternatively, this proactive maintenance could take the form of an inspection-based model whereby assets are inspected, with targeted maintenance to specific trails, sections of trails or areas with recurring issues.

Due to the large volume of Street-to-street Connections and AT facilities and the short cycle required to address certain vegetation types (e.g. Knotweed), the cyclical model poses challenges from a resource perspective. Alternatively, the inspection model presents a more cost-effective approach by targeting resources and maintaining the flexibility of those resources across the maintenance season.

Parks and Recreation

A formal, proactive maintenance program for non-turf vegetation adjacent to trails on Parkland is currently under development for 2025. The program will include some pathways and walkways. Within major parks, most trail systems are regularly maintained by Parks staff throughout the season, with vegetation encroachment issues identified by staff during normal duties, identified by supervisors, or received through calls to 311.

Parks have taken steps in recent years to become more proactive at inspecting and maintaining park assets:

- In 2021, a new Works Control section was added to the Parks division to schedule and track service requests.
- In 2022 and 2023, an asset inspection and Work Order program was created to assess asset condition and conduct regular inspection ratings to identify maintenance issues and capital replacement requirements.
- Eight new permanent, full-time positions for the Trails & Open Spaces shops were approved in the 2024 budget
- A select number of existing trails were trimmed annually in response to Service Requests
- Purchase of vegetation removal equipment and attachments for parks utility vehicles
- Purchase of hand tools such as bush saws and brush saws, mostly battery powered
- In 2025, a trail inspection program will be in place to determine overall trail condition and the state of any encroaching vegetation, maintenance issues, and capital renewal, including park trails and street-to-park trails.

To ensure a comprehensive trail inspection program, all aspects of the trail, including vegetation, will be reviewed, including surfacing conditions, drainage, and trail amenities. Work orders regarding the assessed rating will be prioritized and assigned to parks staff for completion. It is important to note that although it will take time to thoroughly inspect the hundreds of kilometres of park and street-to-park trails and walkways, maintenance work will continue through the Service Request process and regular maintenance routines where active transportation is supported.

Hurricanes and high wind events can create work that takes priority to vegetation maintenance, resulting in a reduced timeline for addressing vegetation encroachment issues or a backlog; however, priority is placed where matters of public safety are identified.

Proactive Inspection & Maintenance Options

Similar to the AT facilities under the responsibility of Public Works, the large number of walkways, pathways, and trails make proactive maintenance through a scheduled, cyclical approach a resource-intensive prospect. As previously noted, Parks has been building its capacity for assessment and inspection across all asset classes within its responsibility.

Asset Management

Asset management staff has recently commenced an initiative to accurately identify the Internal Maintenance Responsibility of all HRM Assets, including distinctions between winter and summer maintenance responsibility for applicable assets. Once completed, this will permit a more accurate accounting of which AT facilities are responsible for which business unit to maintain, facilitating budgeting for proactive inspection and maintenance. Maintenance responsibility is determined through wording within service-level agreements or a review of third-party maintenance agreements. No central source of this maintenance responsibility exists, creating challenges for work planning and budgeting.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Most financial implications will defer to Regional Council's 26/27 budget and business plan deliberations once work to inspect the Active Transportation facilities has been completed, and the quantity of work is known.

RISK CONSIDERATION

The risk associated with the recommendations of this report is low.

Proactive inspection of municipal assets, with target maintenance activities, presents the most cost-effective method of improving public safety and user experience.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

No community engagement was required

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

Work to maintain the current Active Transportation network is always conducted under the lense of ecological sensitivity and would continue to do so. While matters of public safety take priority, Federal and Provincial regulation with respect to impact to natural areas, waterways and wildlife habitat would continue to be followed.

A targeted maintenance approach, led by inspection as opposed to a cyclical maintenance model would permit a more ecologically sensitive approach to vegetation removal adjacent trails by reducing vegetation

removal to only that which is directly impacting the trail and its safety and usability.

ALTERNATIVES

Regional Council could choose to continue to operate under current business practices, managing walkways, pathways, and trails that support active transit connections within communities on a reactive basis.

LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

Halifax Regional Municipality Charter

Section 7A The purposes of the Municipality are to

- (a) provide good government;
- (b) provide services, facilities and other things that, in the opinion of the Council, are necessary or desirable for all or part of the Municipality; and
- (c) develop and maintain safe and viable communities. 2019, c. 19,

Section 35(1) The Chief Administrative Officer shall

- (a) coordinate and direct the preparation of plans and programs to be submitted to the Council for the construction, rehabilitation and maintenance of all municipal property and facilities; ...

Section 77(1) The Municipality may:

- (a) remove dead, dying or diseased trees on public and private property;
- (b) recommend and encourage
 - (i) the proper pruning, protection, and repair of privately-owned trees in the Municipality,

...

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; ...

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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