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**Item No. 15.1.1**  
**Halifax Regional Council**  
**December 2, 2025**

**TO:** Mayor Fillmore and Members of Halifax Regional Council

**FROM:** Brad Anguish, Acting Chief Administrative Officer

**DATE:** November 10, 2025

**SUBJECT:** Municipal Architect for Halifax Regional Municipality & Voluntary Design Review Process

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**ORIGIN**

May 7, 2024 Municipal Architect for Halifax Regional Municipality motion relative to item 15.4.3

MOVED by Councillor Morse, seconded by Councillor Mason

THAT Halifax Regional Council direct the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to provide a staff report that explores the potential for establishing a position of a Municipal Architect funded through the Housing Accelerator Fund (HAF) and other mechanisms to strengthen municipal capacity in urban design, placemaking, heritage protection, and affordable housing, and to further consider best practices in urban design as part of the HAF project approvals and the suburban planning process.

MOTION PUT AND PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.

October 26, 2021 Regional Centre Secondary Municipal Planning Strategy and Land Use Bylaw – Centre Plan Package B motion relative to item 15.1.4

MOVED by Councillor Mason, seconded by Councillor Austin

THAT Halifax Regional Council: ... 4. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to return to Council within 24 months after the effective date of Centre Plan Package B with information on the effectiveness of the expanded voluntary pre-application process as described in the Discussion section of the September 14, 2021 supplementary staff report. ...

MOTION PUT AND PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.

**Recommendation on page 2**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This report outlines an overview of HRM's urban design practices as they relate to the voluntary planning pre-application process that was established in 2021, and the potential for establishing a municipal architect position funded through the Housing Accelerator Fund. This potential is addressed by outlining how HRM incorporates architectural practices into its existing operations. In addition to urban design practices, the use of architectural expertise in Public Works, Strategic Planning and Design, Facility Design and Construction, Procurement, and the Heritage Property Program are addressed.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

It is recommended that Halifax Regional Council:

1. Direct the CAO to continue the current practice of using in-house expertise, supplemented with external consulting expertise where appropriate, to implement urban design guidelines, placemaking, heritage protection, and affordable housing.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Housing Accelerator Fund**

The Housing Accelerator Fund (HAF) is a federal program that is administered by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC). HRM entered into a 3-year agreement with the CMHC on October 12, 2023, committing to an Action Plan that sets out a housing supply growth target and 11 specific initiatives to meet that target. Under the agreement, HRM's housing supply growth target is 20.33%, or an additional 2600 units over the span of the project.

The total amount of HAF funding that HRM will be receiving from 2023 to 2026 is \$79.3 million, contingent on meeting the growth target. HRM established an HAF Action Plan with 11 initiatives that focus on streamlining permit processes, creating incentive programs to increase housing and support affordability, and making regulatory changes. HAF funds can be used to support capital investments that support housing development, and to implement the 11 initiatives under the Action Plan, including related staffing costs. All funding received by HRM through the HAF program must be expended prior to October 12, 2027.

### **Voluntary Planning Pre-Application Process**

In 2021, Council approved Centre Plan Package B (Regional Centre SMPS) which largely enabled development through a permit process and further streamlined the site plan approval process. At the time Council also asked for options to incorporate design review into as-of-right development approvals. This is because as-of-right development permits can only be obtained once all review steps of site plan approval applications are complete, but in the Regional Centre site plan approval is only required if variations are being requested and otherwise development permits can be issued without site plan approval. While the HRM Charter does not enable HRM to require design review before permit applications are submitted, staff created a voluntary pre-application process that allows applicants to obtain early advice for major developments with a \$500 fee. The purpose of the pre-application process was to review proposals against the Land Use By-law and other requirements, as well as provide building design advice to applicants. Council approved this approach but asked for an update on its effectiveness.

## **DISCUSSION**

This report is responding to the 2024 Council motion regarding a Municipal Architect and the 2021 Council motion regarding a design review process, as both relate to HRM's urban design practices.

## **Evolution of Urban Design in the Municipality**

The planning and development of regions, cities and towns is a multi-disciplinary process that includes planning, architecture, engineering, and urban design. While planning is concerned with the organization of land use and built form, and architecture is concerned with the design and construction of buildings, urban design focuses on the spaces between buildings, as well as on the infrastructure, streets, and public spaces. It seeks to integrate planning, architecture and engineering to create urban environments that are visually appealing, functional, and promote social interaction and community. The Municipality has been building capacity in urban design since the early 2000s, following the adoption of the first Regional Plan and recognition that previous planning regulations either did not provide enough guidance on architectural and urban design, or made pedestrian-oriented design difficult to implement. This included:

- Adoption of the Regional Plan with urban design guidelines for the development of the HRMbyDesign Downtown Plan, and the Barrington Street Heritage Conservation District;
- Creation of the first urban designer position in 2005 to spearhead the development of the Downtown Halifax Plan and support initiatives within the Capital District;
- Creation of the Urban Design Group in Planning and Development in 2015 to lead the Centre Plan, heritage and the Argyle Street streetscaping project; and
- Establishment of HRM's Urban Design Awards to celebrate excellence in urban design.

As the volume and complexity of the work increased, the various functions of the Urban Design Group were transferred to other divisions and business units, with the Community Planning team within Planning and Development continuing to focus on updating planning policies and urban design guidelines and requirements.

## **Regulation of Architectural and Urban Design**

HRM's Secondary Municipal Planning Strategies (SMPS) and Land Use By-laws (LUB) are the primary documents for guiding municipal growth and development at a community and neighbourhood scale. There are currently 22 planning areas in the Municipality, each with their own SMPS and LUB containing definitions, zoning, designations, policies, and regulations regarding land use and development. Housing developed under any of the HAF initiatives will be required to meet these municipal policies, LUB regulations, and design requirements. They will undergo the same approval process as all other development applications, either as-of-right, or with review of discretionary aspects by staff.

There is a fine balance between providing land use, built form and design guidance, and enabling housing within relatively streamlined approval processes. Therefore (with the possible exception of heritage design guidelines or local streetscape guidelines) the Municipality tends to provide built form and urban design guidance as opposed to prescriptive architectural guidelines or requirements. This recognizes the professional expertise of architects hired by property owners to design their projects and supports the evolution of design that speaks to the local context but does not necessarily "mimic" one particular aspect of heritage architecture. The focus is on how the building relates to the street and public realm, as opposed to detailed architectural design. Staff frequently consult with the local design community to learn how existing regulations support or hinder good design.

HRM generally handles the drafting of urban design requirements and evaluation of urban design elements of proposals in-house, with the support of external expertise as proficiency has become well-developed over the past 20 years. When the Downtown Halifax Secondary Plan was being drafted, an urban designer position was created so there would be internal expertise upon which to rely. That role helped build capacity within the organization and the business unit and over time more staff with urban design experience have been hired on all teams within Planning & Development. There is now less need for one specific role dedicated to urban design as the expertise is spread more widely with staff who work on policy and development approvals. Consulting contracts can also help supplement in-house expertise on an as-needed basis.

The Downtown Halifax Secondary Plan included the first staff-created Design Manual for site plan approval

applications, drafted with input from an Urban Design Task Force. The Task Force included design professionals, residents, businesses, developers, and heritage staff. The Downtown Halifax Secondary Plan also established the Design Review Committee (DRC) to oversee ongoing administration of the Downtown Plan Design Manual. DRC membership consists of architects, landscape architects, urban designers, engineers, and residents.

Similarly, staff who developed the Regional Centre Secondary Plan (Centre Plan) also created an Urban Design Manual with input from the Community Design Advisory Committee, a group with representatives from Council's Standing Committees, community design (architecture, urban design and planning), business, social/cultural sector, and public health sector professionals. Staff created the Urban Design Manual to guide discretionary applications, and key Centre Plan Core Concepts and Urban Design Principles were implemented through design requirements in the Regional Centre Land Use By-law. While there are options on how the design requirements can be met, once met, a development officer must issue a development permit. There is a degree of flexibility for the applicant's architect to interpret the design requirements in specific contexts.

### **Role of Design Committees**

When the Centre Plan was adopted, a Design Advisory Committee (DAC) was established to advise Development Officers on site plan approval applications within the Regional Centre. Again, its membership included accredited design professionals, and members at large with design experience. The DAC was dissolved in July 2023. The rationale for dissolution was concern about the limited influence the committee had on the design of buildings, as well as the small number of site plan applications received under Centre Plan. With a focus on predictability and efficient approval of site plan applications, the land use by-law minimized qualitative design requirements to simplify administration. The alternative, approved by Council, was an internal review group, composed of municipal staff with policy, land use by-law, site and building design expertise. This approach was considered an improvement as it would include staff expertise on municipal plans and policies and be able to provide advice that aligns with land use policies and regulations. The committee has been reviewing recent design variation requests based on established criteria, and is also able to provide design advice to applicants.

The Downtown Halifax DRC is mandated in the Downtown Halifax SMPS and LUB and has decision making authority, unlike the DAC which was created through an Administrative Order. The DRC meets as needed for site plan approval applications but has only met five times since January 2022. This is largely because, with the exception of the Barrington Street Heritage Conservation District and a small number of transition sites, much of the Downtown Plan has been incorporated into the Centre Plan. The last two meetings of the DRC were in November 2022 and December 2023.

### **Voluntary Planning Pre-Application Process**

As previously noted, HRM's urban design guidelines for discretionary applications and LUB design requirements for permit applications are developed internally with expert committees and advice from consultants as needed. The qualitative guidelines are in the form of a design manual, and more quantitative design requirements are in the LUB. HRM has a design manual for the Downtown Halifax Plan, the Centre Plan, and one is expected for the Suburban Plan as well. Qualitative design requirements within the design manuals can be difficult to administer as the interpretation of these requirements can be subjective and open to debate. Design requirements in LUBs however are more prescriptive, meaning there is less room for interpretation so that minimum requirements are met and they can be administered by staff who do not have specific design expertise.

While staff received a small number of requests for pre-application review shortly before and after Centre Plan adoption, since the establishment of this process there have been very few requests for such meetings. This is likely due to the increased capacity and understanding of Centre Plan requirements among consultants and architects commissioned by applicants to design and develop projects. Design needs to be considered at each step of the process and even minor changes can affect the overall project. While the voluntary review process can still be available, staff advise that it is not widely used. Instead,

community planning and development staff are in frequent contact and any issues are identified for Centre Plan policy or LUB amendments. This also includes site plan approval applications which are also limited in number and in scope due to land use by-law provisions. Since Centre Plan Package B was approved in 2021, staff have processed three site plan approval applications, with only one having been treated through the internal process following DAC dissolution.

### **Municipal Architectural Expertise**

As part of the Council motion to investigate a municipal architect position, the use of such a position in areas other than urban design was referenced. HRM has staff with architectural backgrounds in various business units working in some of these capacities:

- **Placemaking:** includes public and community art, streetscaping projects, parks, plaza spaces, and other elements within the public realm. These types of projects are in place to celebrate and explore identity and develop community connections;
- **Heritage protection:** the retention, preservation, rehabilitation, restoration, conservation, and adaptive re-use of heritage districts, buildings, properties, and cultural landscapes;
- **Affordable housing:** housing that meets the needs of a variety of households in the low to moderate income range. Affordable housing is an aspect of complete neighbourhoods, which is a guiding principle of HRM's Regional Plan. It is achieved through programs, policies, regulations, and reduction or waiving of related fees;
- **Building design:** staff in HRM Facility Design & Construction are involved in building design for municipal projects, and development staff in Planning and Development are involved in reviewing development plans for compliance with built form and applicable urban design requirements or guidelines in municipal planning strategies and land use by-laws.

The range of initiatives that involve architectural expertise make it difficult to consolidate into a single position. This is due to both the specialized expertise needed for certain topics and the coordination between business units. A more detailed description of how the municipality currently handles these responsibilities is below.

### **Placemaking**

HRM undertakes placemaking in a variety of ways. In Parks & Recreation, placemaking refers to the way communities can come together to create pieces of public art such as street painting or community gardens. For instance, the Community Art Program involves professional artists working with residents through collaborative art projects. The Public Art Policy is another placemaking initiative, providing a framework for the Municipality to advance a focused public art agenda by commissioning works of public art of professional artists and designers, engaging the Municipality's arts and cultural sector to inform acquisition of public art, educating, informing, and engaging residents and communities.

HRM Parks & Recreation employs community developers who support volunteers, neighbourhood associations, non-profit organizations, and residents trying to start placemaking community projects. The community developers provide support by connecting with other community partners or municipal government departments, connecting to resources or funding opportunities, identifying next steps to advance a project, helping with community engagement, and delivering programs for volunteers and communities.

HRM employs landscape architects in both the Parks & Recreation and Public Works business units, who work on placemaking initiatives in public places, such as parks, plazas, and streets. Landscape architects consider what is needed for a community space, density and growth considerations, recreation infrastructure, and public open space allocation. There are several individual plans that provide guidance such as the Halifax Common Master Plan and the forthcoming Urban Forest Management Plan and Park

Lighting Strategy. HRM also has Administrative Order 2020-12-OP, regarding Regional Centre Streetscaping, to guide infrastructure and streetscape planning. It aims to improve the public realm of certain streets, and includes project criteria, guidelines, streetscaping elements, and maintenance requirements.

Planning and Development, Strategic Infrastructure and Transportation Planning and Public Works business units use the Municipal Design Guidelines to set standards for public realm improvements related to streets, sidewalks, and active transportation infrastructure.

## **Heritage Protection**

The Heritage Property Program uses the Parks Canada *Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada* (Standards & Guidelines) for assessing heritage value and guiding decisions. These are national conservation principals that have been adopted by numerous federal, provincial and municipal government organizations. In addition to the Standards and Guidelines, the HRM Heritage Property Program looks to the Land Use By-law design requirements for direction on architectural design within heritage contexts such as new development abutting a heritage building. Any such design requirements would align with the Parks Canada *Standards and Guidelines*, which cautions against creating a false sense of historic development by building or adding historic-looking elements that did not originally exist. Fabricating elements that do not align with the history of a place can falsify the story of that place and can compromise heritage value.

HRM's established Heritage Conservation Districts (HCDs) also contain more prescriptive design requirements in the form of a design manual that is administered by the heritage officer. HCDs are a tool provided to municipalities under the *Heritage Property Act of Nova Scotia*, which allow for more robust conservation and development control regulations within designated historic neighbourhoods or areas. The heritage officer position is appointed by Regional Council, and is typically held by the Principal Heritage Planner, who holds specific design expertise related to heritage conservation and design.

Heritage development agreements are a form of discretionary applications that support heritage conservation under Policy CHR-7 of the Halifax Regional Plan. Under this policy, and supporting secondary plan policies, developers can propose additional density or uses to a heritage property if the heritage building is conserved, and the new development is appropriate to the heritage context of the property. Heritage planners evaluate development proposals submitted under this policy against the *Standards and Guidelines* and other municipal design requirements and work with applicants to meet these requirements before bringing a recommendation to Regional or Community Council for approval.

Heritage architecture is a specialized field that requires specific training and qualifications. It is not a common component of architecture programs. An architect with more generalist training may not be qualified to support heritage staff in assessing and recommending heritage design.

## **Affordable Housing**

In 2020, Council adopted Administrative Order 2020-008-ADM, the Grants for Affordable Housing Administrative Order. In 2025, this AO was repealed and replaced with Administrative Order 2025-003-ADM. The purpose of this AO is to provide grants to eligible organizations for the construction, acquisition, or repair of affordable housing. While the grant program is administered and reviewed by HRM staff, each applicant is responsible for the design aspects of their respective project, and ensuring it meets the built form requirements in the Land Use By-law. The AO provides criteria for prioritizing applications for funding, but not for judging design. The HRM grant helps covers the costs of construction and design, as applicants hire external professionals for their designs.

## **Building Design**

HRM's procurement process for public buildings is managed by Facility Design and Construction, and Procurement. There are various delivery methods for procuring public building design, including Design-

Bid-Build, Design-Build, Progressive Design-Build, and Collaborative Design-Build. These methodologies require issuing a Request for Proposal (RFP) to external contractors and having them manage the design and construction. Having a staff architect review the design would lengthen the procurement process and add to costs.

As part of the HAF program, CMHC has released a [Housing Design Catalogue](#) to help expedite missing middle housing construction. The design packages include final renderings, floor plan layouts and key building details for the low-rise housing designs. The designs are specific to each region and have been developed in consultation with local architectural firms, engineering professionals, and HRM development staff to ensure the plans align with regional building codes, planning rules, climate zones, construction methods and materials. There are seven design packages created for Nova Scotia, and include accessory dwelling units, fourplexes, a six-plex, and stacked townhouses. HRM is a Local Partner in this CMHC initiative, and has committed to promoting the plans, streamlining development approvals for the designs, and tracking their uptake.

### **Jurisdictional Scan and Best Practices**

Staff conducted a jurisdictional scan for Canadian cities with architects on staff. Edmonton has a city architect position, established in 2005, and has since included other project architects, that report to the city architect. The Architecture team is responsible for planning and managing civic building and facility projects as well as meeting with the Planning and Development department to ensure that projects meet their requirements for development and building permit approvals.

Many municipalities across Canada hire architects or those with an architectural background as urban designers, a position which bridges planning and architecture work. In 2016, Vancouver established their Urban Design division, whose staff focus on four areas: urban development, urban planning, landscape, and heritage. HRM's Planning and Development department previously had an urban design program which included staff involved in streetscaping design and heritage planning and included an urban designer who assisted in drafting the design requirements in the Downtown Halifax Plan and Centre Plan. A subsequent reorganization of the business unit in 2019 reassigned these staff to other programs and divisions. Internal urban design expertise is maintained with a specific focus on program administration within the Heritage Property Program, the Office of Strategic Infrastructure and Transportation Planning, the Streetscapes Program within Public Works, Parks and Recreation, and Facilities Design and Construction within Property Fleet and Environment Services. Design-related training and experience is also considered an asset when recruiting staff within all divisions of the Planning and Development business unit. This expertise is often called upon on a project or application-specific basis.

### **Use of HAF Funds**

None of HRM's HAF Action Plan initiatives involve in-house design or construction of housing. Rather, they are aimed at supporting residents, developers, and the non-profit sector to build housing. Therefore, staffing costs related to HAF Action Plan implementation would not extend to a municipal architect position. Apart from funds used to achieve the HAF initiatives, any remaining funds can only be used by the Municipality towards expenditures that fit the following funding parameters:

- investments in HAF action plans
- investments in affordable housing
- investments in housing-related infrastructure, and
- investments in community-related infrastructure that supports housing.

Staff are bringing forward potential capital projects for HAF funds as part of the budget and business planning process.

The use of HAF funding to fund a Municipal Architect position would not clearly fall into one of the aforementioned four categories of eligible expenditures. The closest would be "capacity building that supports housing" under the category of "investments in housing-related infrastructure". Additionally, under

the terms of the contribution agreement with the federal government, all HAF funds must be spent by October 12, 2027. Therefore, if an architect position was created using HAF funds it would either be time-limited, or municipal operating funding would need to be identified to support the position going forward.

### **Future Work**

Our understanding of design is always changing and the community's goals for the character of their communities is also subject to change and evolution. While prescriptive design may be appropriate in some cases such as in heritage restoration or in the development of new heritage conservation districts, applied more broadly it risks being overly prescriptive. It can also conflict with other goals, such as the delivery of housing that is affordable and energy efficient. The refinement of current design guidelines will be prioritized as part of future Centre Plan updates, in the development of new heritage conservation districts, and as part of the new Suburban Plan.

### **Conclusion**

HRM has policies, practices and staff in place that address various roles associated with architectural background or expertise. These practices span a wide range of business units, each involving different specializations within the architecture profession. It would be difficult to combine these specializations into one municipal architect position. There are several HRM staff with architecture backgrounds working in planning, urban design, and placemaking roles using that expertise. This appears to be in line with best practices across Canadian municipalities, HRM also partners with external architecture stakeholders when necessary, accessing their expertise as advisory committee members.

HRM is using some of its \$79.3 million in HAF funding to implement the eleven initiatives in its Action Plan. Any remaining funds must be used for investments in affordable housing, investments in housing-related infrastructure, and investments in community-related infrastructure that supports housing. Staff are reviewing HRM's capital project list and will be identifying potential projects that can be supported by HAF funds. These will come to Council in the budget and business planning process.

### **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no financial implications to this report. If Council chooses to proceed with the alternative recommendation in this report, a supplementary staff report would be required to identify a funding source for a municipal architect position and the request would need to be referred to the budget process.

### **RISK CONSIDERATION**

No risk considerations were identified.

### **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

No community engagement was required.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS**

No environmental implications were identified.

### **ALTERNATIVES**

Regional Council could choose to direct the Chief Administrative Officer to create a municipal architect

position. This is not recommended as it would duplicate work already being managed with existing staff resources and it would require a funding source other than HAF funds. Should Council wish to pursue this option it would need to be referred to the budget process.

### **LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY**

*Halifax Regional Municipality Charter, S.N.S. 2008, c. 39*

34 (1) The Chief Administrative Officer is the head of the administrative branch of the government of the Municipality and is responsible to the Council for the proper administration of the affairs of the Municipality in accordance with the by-laws of the Municipality and the policies adopted by the Council.

...

(3) The Council shall provide direction on the administration, plans, policies and programs of the Municipality to the Chief Administrative Officer.

...

35 (2) The Chief Administrative Officer may (d) subject to policies adopted by the Council, ...

(iv) establish departments of the municipal administration,

(v) adopt a system of classification of positions of municipal officers and employees and specify offices that must not be filled by the same person,

...

Part VIII, Planning & Development

### **ATTACHMENTS**

N/A

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