



# DOWNTOWN HALIFAX VISION 2030

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**Downtown Halifax Business Commission**

More information on our [website](#).

## **Executive Summary**

### **Everybody's Neighbourhood**

Downtown Halifax is a place where everyone feels welcome.

Conduct a study that determines the ideal ingredients for a complete neighbourhood:

- population
- amenities
- business & residential
- historic building protection
- cultural diversity

Incentivize turning unused office space into homes.

Create an Urban Parks Strategy that optimizes existing green space and reveals gaps.

Establish a District Strategy for designation, design, and promotion for Downtown's Districts.

Revitalize Barrington Street.

Increase investment in public safety initiatives

### **Harbour 365**

Downtown Halifax maximizes its greatest asset year-round.

Improve the Dartmouth-Halifax ferry service by increasing frequency and making it free.

Establish George Street as Downtown's gateway to the water and enhance other key connection points.

Create an updated Harbour Plan that includes:

- events
- waterfront land use
- harbour islands access & activation
- water transportation
- placemaking
- sea level rise mitigation

### **Entertainment Central**

Downtown Halifax is a nationally renowned destination for arts, culture, and entertainment.

Build new venues:

- art gallery
- 1500+ seat performing arts centre
- permanent outdoor public event space

Create a year-round event strategy that includes attraction & retention, facilitation, and organization.

Designate a Cultural District.

## **Move Smart**

Getting to and moving around Downtown Halifax is easy.

Build a bus rapid transit (BRT) system that prioritizes the Downtown lines.

Invest in a high-frequency Downtown connector loop.

Prioritize pedestrian-first design on all streets, including crosswalks, sidewalks, and directional signage.

Establish a complete network of protected bike lanes.

Create a connected hub for bikes, ferries, and buses.

## **4 Transformational Moves, Explained**

### **Everybody's Neighbourhood**

**Downtown Halifax is a place where everyone feels welcome.**

To be “Everybody’s Neighbourhood”, Downtown must continue its evolution from a central business district and a visitor destination, to also being a neighbourhood where many different types of people choose to live. This includes having all the residential amenities that one would expect in a complete neighbourhood. It should feel safe and welcoming to residents and visitors alike.

#### **A Neighbourhood Study**

As Halifax continues to grow sustainably, it will become a city of interconnected complete neighbourhoods, each offering opportunities for living, working, and playing close to home. Downtown Halifax will become the centre, and largest, of these complete neighbourhoods. For this to happen, there is an ideal balance that needs to be planned, taking into account the recent evolution of residents’ and businesses’ needs.

A new study needs to be done that would delve into desired outcomes regarding population targets, appropriate residential-serving amenities, and business mixes that would serve that greater density, while preserving what makes the area so special. The result of this study will include: a full spectrum of housing affordability that includes both high end and government subsidized non-market options; opportunities for a broader cultural and demographic mix; and protection of identity-defining historic buildings.

#### **Office Conversion Incentives**

The advent of hybrid work and the extremely low residential vacancy rate lends itself to the obvious solution of turning some unused office space into homes for people. Halifax is already seeing this, thanks to progressive developers and limited restrictions, but it is still complicated and expensive. According to Canadian Urban Institute’s study in this area, Canadian cities that are seeing conversions, at scales greater than Halifax, are doing so because they offer financial and policy incentives. Appropriate, similar programs in Halifax would accelerate developers’ ability to do more of this here.

#### **Urban Parks Strategy**

Parks are a key recreational amenity, required to attract and serve high density residential growth. Downtown has inherited a substantial amount of green space from previous generations, but it is not known whether it is sufficient for a substantially larger population, or whether its configuration or

programming is appropriate. A new Urban Parks Strategy would catalogue existing green space and determine appropriate overall area, type, and programming needs based on our growth trajectory.

## **District Strategy**

Desirable urban areas are often known, less by their overall downtown, and more by their smaller districts. Just a few examples include Vieux-Montreal, Nyhavn (Copenhagen), SoHo, Chinatown, London's West End, etc. Downtown Halifax has several Districts already (e.g., Argyle Entertainment, Waterfront, Barrington Heritage), and strong opportunities for more, such as Cogswell and the Gateway Districts. Establishing a District Strategy would see a concerted effort in properly identifying and promoting Downtown's existing Districts, as well as designating new ones. Better wayfinding signage with unique design standards will make it clear when you are in a defined district, and also how you could best move from one to the other.

## **Barrington Street**

Barrington Street has a glorious past, and future, as Halifax's main street. Efforts to make Barrington Street more vibrant in this regard have occurred for several decades, through municipal and BID studies, working groups, and academic papers. The most recent effort was the formation of the Barrington Heritage Conservation District (2009) which led to private and public investment, the significant preservation of historic buildings, and a residential revival. Despite this, ground floor vacancies persist, and pedestrian volumes have not kept pace with other areas of Downtown. Currently, just the section between Duke Street and Spring Garden Road attempts to be both a main traffic and transit thoroughfare, a retail high street, a pedestrian-priority area, the financial district, and architectural showcase. All of these uses, though important, are not necessarily working in unison to help Barrington reclaim its main street status. Using research already done and building on the momentum of the new Cogswell District, a concept for a new Barrington main street, as well as actions, needs to commence.

## **Public Safety Investments**

Without a strong sense that a downtown is safe, other efforts to revitalize it will never be fully successful. After decades of progress, a trend has recently emerged that the feeling of safety in urban cores across North America is eroding. This trend must be immediately and persistently reversed in Downtown Halifax. There needs to be a renewed focus on proactive and visible community-based policing. We also need to see new investments and strategies that allow for more "eyes on the street" (as urbanist Jane Jacobs coined it); enhance urban design in lighting; and address the homelessness, mental health, and addiction issues that are impacting our community.

## Harbour 365

### **Downtown Halifax maximizes its greatest asset year-round.**

The Harbour is why Downtown Halifax exists. The Mi'kmaq had summer encampments here and called it "Amntu'kati" ("Spirit Grove"), and the area is central to their creation story. It is why the British built the Citadel fortress here. It is why Halifax became the largest Canadian city east of Quebec City. It is why over a million tourists visit annually. Halifax's motto, "E Mari Merces" means "Wealth from the Sea".

### **Free and Faster Ferry**

Imagine walking between Downtown Dartmouth and Downtown Halifax (two important parts of the greater urban core) whenever you wanted to. To fulfil this dream, the Alderney-Halifax ferry service should be free and more frequent. An immediate change would be to schedule it to run every 15 minutes, 7 days a week, and late into the night. Eventually it could be a 24/7 service. This would greatly benefit residents and businesses on both sides of the harbour and serve as a convenient and attractive tourist amenity – one for which you would never need a schedule, because the ferry would be so reliable.

### **George Street as a "Gateway"**

Downtown Halifax sits in an incredible land of opportunity – between the Waterfront and Citadel Hill – two of the most visited destinations in Nova Scotia. A walkable city needs well-articulated pedestrian routes, to lead visitors to where they should want to go to visit key sites. Currently this is lacking on Downtown's east-west streets, and is made more challenging by the hilly topography, inadequate design, and poor wayfinding signage. To truly connect the Waterfront with Downtown, a signature streetscape investment should be made on at least one east-west street. The best choice for this is George Street, due to its natural access to the Ferry Terminal, grand view of the Halifax Town Clock, and its potential to complete the missing piece of a pedestrian-priority route connecting the key civic assets between Halifax Public Gardens and the boardwalk. Along with George Street as a central promenade, design and signage along all other Lower Water Street intersections is required to help draw people up those hills.

### **Harbour Plan**

The Halifax Waterfront District has undeniably seen incredible transformation over the past several decades. It is home to shops, restaurants, tourism operators, marine operations, and Canada's east coast navy. It boasts the longest urban boardwalk in North America and sits by one of the deepest ice-free ports in the world. The District currently falls under the operations of Build Nova Scotia, Halifax Port Authority, Halifax Regional Municipality, as well as some private ownership. Working collaboratively, a new plan needs to be created that provides direction and aspirations for how we continue to steward and grow this key asset. The plan should include the following priority areas:

**future land uses; harbour islands access and activation; events; water transportation (private and public); beautification and placemaking; sea level rise mitigation.**

## **Entertainment Central**

**Downtown Halifax is a nationally renowned destination for arts, culture, and entertainment.**

Though Downtown needs to continue to evolve from a central business district to a complete neighbourhood, it also needs to remain the prime destination for visitors. Downtown Halifax needs to solidify its reputation as the undisputed capital of Atlantic Canada, specifically in arts, culture, and entertainment. As a city of over 500,000 people – and rapidly growing – there is a need for new venues. Nova Scotia is home to a wealth of natural talent and this strength should be driving tourism, and fundamentally boosting the quality of life for all Nova Scotians.

### **Build New Venues**

#### **Art Gallery**

The current Art Gallery of Nova Scotia (AGNS) has served us well. However, a significant study has been done in recent years, identifying that the current facility has maintenance, internal climate, space configuration, and overall size limitations. The time has come for an expanded gallery so we can attract new (and more) displays and shows, as well as showcase more of the assets that AGNS already has. A new art gallery, as either an iconic stand-alone structure, or as part of a more comprehensive cultural centre, would be a marquee attraction.

#### **1,500+ seat Performing Arts Centre**

Downtown needs to have a variety of performance venues, including a purpose-built one that seats between 1,500 and 3,000. This would serve to fill the gap that currently exists between Scotiabank Centre's 10,000 seats, and smaller venues like the Light House Arts Centre and Neptune Theatre. The new venue would attract shows which currently are not feasible to bring to Nova Scotia, and also act as a permanent Downtown home for Halifax-based music and arts groups.

#### **Permanent Outdoor Public Events Space**

Halifax boasts an impressive number of outdoor festivals and events. However, as development occurs, these spaces can be lost, and events find themselves moved around in any given year. Therefore, there is a need for a new or expanded central location that is consistent. This facility

would include sufficient capacity, amenities (electrical, flexible seating and stage, weather coverings), and consistent management, for larger outdoor events.

### **Year-Round Events**

Halifax is an undisputed events city, particularly in the warmer months. Specific efforts need to be made to ensure that there is a stocked events calendar year-round that pays special attention to activating the Downtown from January to June. A strategy is needed that not only identifies and attracts events, but also includes coordination around all facets of those events. This includes leading the bidding process; identifying the organizational lead on events or acting as that lead; assisting organizers in the creation of new events; and ensuring proper financial and administrative support.

### **Cultural District Designation**

Being a hotbed of culture and events is not enough – we must tell that story to the world. To better cement and promote Downtown Halifax’s position as Atlantic Canada’s premiere arts and entertainment destination, a specific area of the Downtown should be designated as a Cultural District. This is a key component to the overall District Strategy (being proposed in this Vision) and would include the intentional clustering of the investments in infrastructure being recommended.

### **Move Smart**

#### **Getting to and moving around Downtown Halifax is easy.**

It is fundamental to a downtown’s success that it be easy to get to, and easy to get around. This should be in a multitude of ways, but a city poised for success needs to prioritize mass transit and the pedestrian experience over single-occupant vehicles. Given the cost of housing in Downtown Halifax, and the cost of car ownership, enabling improved connection to other areas of the city is also an investment in equity.

#### **Bus Rapid Transit**

Bus rapid transit (BRT) is a high-capacity bus-based transit system that provides fast and reliable service through dedicated bus lanes that move people to their destination more rapidly than their car ever could. A BRT system is an expensive and multi-year process, but it is necessary in Halifax now. Its development must be significantly accelerated, and it must prioritize key lines which directly connect Downtown to high population areas as its first investment. It must also have extended hours of operation, so that the transit system is not only a preferred mode for working commuters, but also residents coming Downtown for entertainment, throughout the day and evening. Such an investment does not preclude light rail transit (LRT), as LRT could replace BRT over time, using the same routes.



## **Downtown Loop**

Getting to Downtown is important, but mobility throughout the Downtown is a key aspect that will enhance the experience for visitors and workers, and also unlock the potential for Downtown residents to not need to own their own vehicles. Drawing inspiration from Halifax's tram system (1866-1949) and FRED ("Free Rides Everywhere Downtown", 1996-2011), a Downtown loop, or multiple loops, should be created which connects the main arrival points/terminals, key visitor sites, parkades, and employment nodes. This loop would be serviced on a frequent and free timetable, by smaller multi-passenger vehicles.

## **Pedestrian-First Design**

Pedestrians should feel like their mobility is the highest priority. Beyond major streetscape projects (such as Argyle Street, Spring Garden Road, and the recommendation for George Street in this Vision), pedestrian priority should be part of the ongoing design and maintenance of all Downtown streets. This can be accomplished in many ways, including:

- Widened sidewalks
- Crosswalks raised to the level of the sidewalk and/or ones that continue the sidewalk design across the intersection
- Street murals
- Artistic crosswalks, commemorating things/events/people of cultural significance
- Marked crosswalks at all 4 intersection crossings and mid-block crossings
- Reduced vehicle speeds
- Additional sidewalk amenities, including street trees, weather coverings, seating, eye-level art, and better designed paths in parks (i.e., more aligned with shortcuts and "desire paths").

## **Bike Network**

Studies conducted over the past two decades consistently show that bike lanes, when done as part of a connected network, have environmental, congestion-reducing, and also economic benefits for Downtown businesses. Other downtowns around the world with similar climates, small streets, and steep hills have successfully embraced cycling on a large scale. To see a mass movement toward cycling, for commuters and residents, urgent completion of an All Ages and Abilities (AAA) Network needs to be completed. The network must have both key north-south and east-west bike lane connectors that are physically separated and protected from vehicular traffic. The Downtown network should connect with commuter bike lanes to both the North and South Ends.

## **Transportation Hub**

Urban transit terminals are a key piece of infrastructure, which should serve as a Downtown's destination point, and tie in all modes of non-car transportation, including bus, bike, and ferry. A key component of the priorities in this Vision point towards seeing at least one of these hubs/terminals in

Downtown Halifax. With a required re-design of the Ferry Terminal to accommodate the new Bedford ferry, this is the time to study and determine the site and scale of such a facility.