

2025-2026 Municipal Budget Submission

Submitted to:
Mayor Andy Fillmore and HRM Regional Council
Chief Administrative Officer, Cathie O'Toole
Director of Finance, Jerry Blackwood

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ABOUT DOWNTOWN HALIFAX BUSINESS COMMISSION

Downtown Halifax Business Commission (DHBC) is the business improvement district (BID) that represents the 1,600 businesses and landlords and 22,000 employees in the urban core of Nova Scotia's capital city. The Downtown area represents \$1.64b of commercial assessment, or 15.6% of HRM's total commercial assessment. DHBC is a not-for-profit organization that works to passionately pursue a more prosperous and vibrant Downtown.

DHBC is guided by four focus areas: Advocacy, Marketing + Communications, Membership Engagement, and Placemaking. DHBC runs programs, projects, events, and initiatives to help Downtown Halifax a better place to live, work, and play. DHBC is guided by a 15-person board of directors, chaired by Ashwin Kutty. There is a staff complement of 9 fulltime employees, including CEO, Paul MacKinnon.

DHBC is a member of the International Downtown Association, and its domestic advocacy arm, IDA Canada. It is a founding member of Downtowns Atlantic Canada (DAC), which represents more than 40 Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) in the 4 Atlantic Canadian provinces. It works closely with the 14 BIDs in Nova Scotia, who share a common goal of building vibrant communities, with strong downtowns and commercial main streets.

In the year to come, DHBC will be focused on encouraging the three levels of government, and stakeholders, to implement Downtown Halifax Vision 2030, which was launched in the spring of 2024, following extensive community consultation. The Vision contains 4 Transformational Moves, and 17 specific priorities. This budget submission will focus on those that will require provincial funding and support.

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DOWNTOWN HALIFAX VISION 2030

The Need for a New Vision

The importance of Downtown Halifax is undeniable to anyone who believes in a prosperous, inclusive, and desirable province. This has always been the case, but we now live in a special moment of opportunity, due to the booming population growth, unfettered access to the best ideas, and the confidence given to us, from knowing that we have done big things before, and can again.

With over 24,000 people employed by downtown businesses, this is the largest employment node in Nova Scotia. This concentration of people and ideas fosters an environment where social, business, and government interactions create an attractive environment for job opportunities, talent and investments.

Downtown is not just the heart of our capital city, but it is the showroom of Atlantic Canada. Packed with restaurants, bars, music, art, theatre, and events, Downtown Halifax enriches the lives of its visitors and residents alike.

Having a new vision, and relentlessly working to realize it, is an investment in our future. Our history tells us that we are not afraid of bold moves. Recent examples of this are the transformation of our industrial waterfront; investing in a new convention centre, library, and the Argyle Entertainment District. We must seize the power of this moment to once again shape our future.

Creating the Vision

From September 2023 to April 2024, DHBC consulted with key stakeholders, urban experts, policy makers, business owners, and the public to help answer the question: “What are the big moves needed to ensure our Downtown is vibrant and successful in 2030 and beyond?”.

The consultation process involved:

- 10 2-hour engagement sessions, with over 100 stakeholders
- Numerous one-on-one meetings with key community leaders and government officials
- A public, open-ended questionnaire that produced hundreds of pages of comments

Four Transformational Moves were identified from the data:

- Everybody’s Neighbourhood
- Harbour 365
- Entertainment Central
- Move Smart

Out of the process also came 17 programs, policies, and priorities.

www.downtownhalifax.ca/vision2030

Budget Recommendations

An ongoing priority for DHBC and its members is sound fiscal stewardship by the municipality. Given the substantial increase in assessments, HRM should be able to make strategic investments without increasing the commercial tax rate. This can be accomplished by (i) setting priorities that will lead to long term economic growth, such as those in Vision 2030; (ii) seeking alternate external funding sources. Please see the letter from Halifax BIDs, attached to this document.

Virtually all of the 17 recommendations in Downtown Vision 2030 will require direct investment and/or involvement from HRM, and 11 of those will require direct provincial government investment or policy changes. The top three budget recommendations for HRM are:

1. Bus Rapid Transit funding

Clearly the top priority in the Vision, and based on broad community consultation across the city, for all citizens of HRM, is a better transit system. Developing and implementing a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system, which can also incorporate the Bedford ferry and Light Rail line(s), needs to be advanced urgently. A growing city, with a challenging geography, has resulted in longer commute times, and frustrated commuters. Greater mobility can only be obtained through a fundamentally new transportation system, which is a faster option than taking one's car. Funds should be allocated for transit plan development/refinement, funding of both capital and operating expenses, and acquisition of land for dedicated bus routes. This should also be a top priority HRM makes to access provincial and federal funding.

2. Ferry funding

A key part of a more efficient transit system is maximizing the ferries. HRM should cost-share with the provincial government making the Downtown Halifax – Alderney ferry free, much more frequent, with longer operational hours. Following municipal amalgamation in 1996, the expanded urban core has been walkable with the exception of the parts that remain separated by water. There is an expectation that people should be able to walk from one to the other, by way of the ferry, which is the “sidewalk” between the two parts of our downtown. Visitation tracking data shows that Dartmouth Centre is the third-highest source of local visitors to Downtown Halifax. Removing barriers would grow this even more, ease commuter congestion, and would also have significant benefits to tourism (both leisure and convention attendees).

3. Downtown Loop

While Halifax Transit focuses on getting people to and from work, it is essential that mobility around the downtown is enhanced. Between 1866 and 1949, the city's tram system did just that. Between 1996 and 2011, FRED ("Free Rides Everywhere Downtown") the Bus did the same. Providing a shuttle loop service remains an unfulfilled Policy direction from HRM by Design, and it should be alleviated, to ease congestion and promote mobility.

Policy Recommendations

Of the 17 recommendations in Downtown Vision 2030, 11 will likely require direct provincial government investment or policy changes. The top six policy recommendations are:

1. Commitment to lead/participate in a stewardship model to implement Downtown Halifax Vision 2030

It is critical that a stewardship model be established to implement/monitor/advocate for Vision 2030. This requires dedicated staff who would have an established reporting mechanism back to HRM Council. It would also require an advisory group which would have representation from key stakeholders, including senior HRM staff and HRM-affiliated organizations, such as Events East and Halifax Partnership.

2. Construction Compensation Fund approval

DHBC supports HRM's submission to the provincial government (February 5, 2020), asking for changes to the Halifax Charter, which would allow HRM to create a construction compensation program, to offset losses incurred due to municipal construction projects.

3. HRM planning priorities

Several of the Vision recommendations would require the lead of HRM Planning, including Downtown Study, office conversion funding, district designation, Barrington St and George St streetscape plans, and Harbour plan. These should be prioritized within the planning department.

4. Appointment of trained municipal staff as special constables for special events

DHBC supports HRM's submission to allow the appointment of trained municipal staff to serve as special constables for special events, in lieu of police officers. A record year for tourism in 2024 was key in bringing total visitation to downtown back to pre-pandemic levels for the first time. Events are a main driver of tourism, but event organizers are constrained by a lack of available Halifax Regional police officers, as well as the cost-prohibitive fees associated with engaging them. Special constables would be trained, and also a more cost-effective option, which would expand the variety of events held.

HALIFAX BIDs

February 20, 2025

Halifax Regional Municipality Council
Halifax City Hall
1841 Argyle Street
Halifax, NS, B3J 3A5

Dear Mayor Fillmore and Members of Halifax Regional Council,

The nine Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) of HRM are currently working to support over 3,300 local businesses, which together represent 23% of HRM's total commercial assessment base. Collectively, BIDs bring over \$4,000,000 of private sector funding to the city's economic development ecosystem, through marketing, events, placemaking, and other activities. The BIDs are sending individual budget submissions, regarding area-specific priorities.

Eight of the BIDs fall under HRM's Downtown/Community commercial tax zone. Businesses in this zone are facing a 7% increase in their 2025 assessments and so will have significantly higher municipal tax bills. Hence, we believe it is appropriate for HRM Council to freeze the existing tax rate, rather than the 0.3% increase in the staff proposal.

We understand that the municipality is facing significant growth and inflation-related pressures. However, the Halifax business community remains one of the highest-taxed in the country, and increasing that burden is not the answer. We would be supportive of a new model of tax revenue sharing between the province and the city, to better face the mounting infrastructure deficit, and more fairly share the benefits of the growth we are experiencing. We urge HRM Council and staff to continue their efforts to amend the current model with the provincial government.

Respectfully submitted,

Downtown Dartmouth
Downtown Halifax
North End Halifax
Quinpool Road Area
Sackville
Spring Garden Area
Spryfield
Village on Main

Other Resources

Downtown Vision 2030:

www.downtownhalifax.ca/vision2030

Downtown Halifax 2024 State of the Downtown Report:

[2024 State of The Downtown - Downtown Halifax by downtownhalifax - Issuu](#)

Halifax Regional Municipality Rapid Transit Strategy:

[Rapid Transit Strategy - Final - May 2020.pdf](#)