

2026-2027 Provincial Budget Submission

Presented to the Honourable John Lohr
Nova Scotia Minister of Finance and Treasury Board

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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 in commercial assessment, or 16.5% 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 Marilisa Benigno. There is a staff complement of 9 fulltime employees, led by 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 continued population boom in the urban core, unfettered access to the best ideas across the globe, 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

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

1. Bus Rapid Transit funding

Work with HRM to develop and fund implementation of the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system. 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. Now that Link NS has endorsed HRM's Bus Rapid Transit strategy, the province should both allocate significant funds for implementation of this transit plan, but also act as a champion to acquire federal funding, identifying this as our top infrastructure priority for Halifax.

2. Ferry funding

Cost-share a minimum 50% of the amount required to make 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. This would have benefits to tourism, and also help alleviate vehicular commuter congestion. This philosophy is also aligned with the province's recent elimination of tolls on the harbour bridges.

3. Invest in Culture: (i) Set a timeline for the design and building of a new Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, (ii) Create a process to foster the building of a 1,500+ seat performing arts centre

The province should work with the board of the AGNS, to embark on a renewed design/location and timeline for a replacement for the Art Gallery. The Province should indicate its support for the need of a 1,500+ seat performing arts centre, and work with the private sector to seek expressions of interest in a partnership to see its creation.

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, which would have an established reporting mechanism back to HRM Council and the Provincial Government. It would also require an advisory group which would have representation from key stakeholders, including senior provincial staff (Growth and Development; Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage; Joint Regional Transportation Agency), with political direction to advance the Vision.

2. Harbour/Boardwalk plan

The Halifax Waterfront is Nova Scotia's most-visited tourist destination. This is thanks to the decades of work of the provincial government and the crown corporation(s) managing it. It is time for a renewed plan for both the waterfront and the harbour, to ensure appropriate investments continue to drive this important economic asset. This is even more crucial to do now, with Cogswell and Casino NS lands coming to market.

3. Amendments to the Motor Vehicle Act

Current MVA provisions hamper the implementation of many pedestrian-friendly improvements to downtown streets. MVA changes or provincial approvals need to be given to allow for the design of a downtown that gives pedestrians priority.

4. Construction Compensation Fund approval

DHBC supports HRM's submission of 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.

5. Business Improvement District (BID) Fund

Business Improvement Districts are privately-funded and managed economic development engines that create culture, support events, beautify, and act as advocates for healthy and vibrant communities. Nova Scotia can foster the existence and the renewal of BIDs across the province, through the creation of a \$500,000 BID fund. This fund could be replicated from a similar one introduced by the NB provincial government, entitled “Investment in the Heart of our Communities”, in 2023.

6. Expedite HRM planning approvals

Several of the Vision recommendations may require provincial approval, including Downtown Study, office conversion funding, district designation, Barrington St and George St streetscape plans. These should receive quick approvals, due to their relationship to Downtown Vision 2030.

Other Resources

Downtown Vision 2030:

www.downtownhalifax.ca/vision2030

Downtown Halifax 2025 State of the Downtown Report:

[2025 State of The Downtown - Downtown Halifax by downtownhalifax - Issuu](#)

Halifax Regional Municipality Rapid Transit Strategy:

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

Link NS Regional Transportation Plan:

<https://linknovascotia.ca/regional-transportation-plan/>