

2026-2027 Municipal Budget Submission

Submitted to:
Mayor Andy Fillmore and HRM Regional Council
Chief Administrative Officer, Brad Anguish
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 Marilisa Benigno. There is a staff complement of nine full-time 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 municipal 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 a consistent desire for people to live downtown, unfettered access to the best ideas, and the confidence given to us, from knowing that we have done big things before, and can again. Despite these great advantages, we face hurdles to vibrancy in the urban core, including poor business confidence, flat commercial property assessments, significant social challenges, and fiscal constraints within municipal spending abilities. Hard choices need to be made, but a focus on a strong urban core must be maintained.

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. Commercial assessment values across all of HRM continue to grow, rising by 7.86%. It should be noted that the majority of this increase was a rise in existing values, rather than the addition of new construction. Downtown’s assessment value rose by 3.16%. **Hence, HRM should be able to make strategic investments without increasing the downtown commercial tax rate** (please see attached letter from Halifax’s 9 BIDs). 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, including a new funding model from the province.

We look forward to reviewing the upcoming HRM staff report, which outlines how Vision 2030 aligns with HRM priorities.

DHBC’s 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. With HRM and LinkNS aligned in this direction, this should be a top priority in HRM’s infrastructure asks of the Federal government.

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. Wayfinding

Downtown Halifax continues to benefit from strong multi-sector efforts of attracting visitors from afar, as well as Nova Scotians, to explore the urban core for events, dining, and attractions. Navigating the Downtown, and understanding how the districts connect can be a challenge. HRM commissioned a wayfinding signage study in 2004 [*Capital District Urban Design Project, Volume 2: Visual Identity and Wayfinding Signage, Gordon Radcliffe Landscape Architects*], which was never implemented. This study remains a solid foundation with which HRM could work with Build NS and other stakeholders, to design and implement a wayfinding system, to make all areas of downtown more accessible.

4. 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 implemented, 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.

5. Investigation of new financing models to support Downtown

Other cities have successfully funded large scale downtown projects, even in the face of significant fiscal restraints. Examples include Calgary, Edmonton, and Kitchener. In particular, a tool that has recently seen extended life in Edmonton is a Community Revitalization Levy (CRL), which will contribute \$500 million to their Downtown Action Plan. Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) is a tool which could assist in the economic viability of preserving heritage assets, particularly in Heritage Conservation Districts. Reinvesting a portion of on-street paid parking revenues back into the area in which they are earned, either through a Parking Benefit District, or directly to the local BID, would be a non-tax source of revenue for urban areas, and should be considered. DHBC would also be supportive of HRM negotiating a new funding framework with the Province of NS, as has been recently undertaken in Quebec (a 1% share of PST). HRM should also

explore new service delivery models with BIDs, and other organizations with which HRM has a service contract, in order to be more efficient and cost-effective.

HALIFAX BIDs

January 21, 2026

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 almost a quarter 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. Some BIDs will be sending individual budget submissions regarding area-specific priorities. This letter represents our collective position.

Commercial assessments, have increased by 7.86%¹ across all of HRM. It should be noted that roughly 80% of this increase is due to rising assessments, rather than new construction. The total commercial assessment for the eight BIDs in HRM's Downtown/Community commercial tax zone has increased 8.05%² over 2025. Hence, even a flat commercial tax rate would result in substantially higher tax bills for most businesses. At a time when businesses are already struggling with escalating operating costs, including substantial increases from NS Power, Halifax Water, insurance, labour, and supplies, this additional tax burden is deeply concerning. Many small and independent businesses are actively pursuing efficiencies simply to remain viable. Expecting them to absorb the lion's share of increased municipal revenue generated through higher assessments is neither sustainable nor fair. For these reasons, we strongly urge Council to reduce the commercial property tax rate to help balance the impact of increased assessments. This would help offset assessment-driven increases and demonstrate meaningful support for the business community at a time when many

¹ PVSC presentation to HRM Council, January 20, 2026

² 2026 assessments provided to BIDs by HRM

businesses are at risk of not surviving. Supporting businesses is not only critical to economic vitality, but also to maintaining vibrant commercial districts, employment opportunities, and the tax base itself.

We understand that the municipality is facing significant fiscal pressures, due to inflation and growth related costs. However, the Halifax business community remains one of the highest-taxed in the country, and continually increasing that burden is not the only answer. We suggest the following, for consideration:

- We support the Mayor's suggestion of a municipal audit to uncover inefficiencies.
- The BIDs, and other business groups, are supportive of proposing a new model of tax revenue sharing between the province and the city.
- The BIDs are supportive of working with HRM to identify key infrastructure investments which could be supported through the federal Build Communities Strong Fund.
- The BIDs are supportive of working with HRM to potentially assist in the delivery of more cost-effective programs, particularly related to maintenance and safety.

Respectfully submitted,
Downtown Dartmouth
Downtown Halifax
North End Halifax
Porter's Lake
Quinpool Road Area
Sackville
Spring Garden Area
Spryfield
Village on Main

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](#)