



October 9, 2013

Mayor Mike Savage and Councilors of Halifax Regional Council,
Halifax Regional Municipality,
PO Box 1749
Halifax, N.S. B3J 3A5

Dear Mayor Savage & Councilors:

I am writing on behalf of the board of the Woodens River Watershed Environmental Organization (WRWEO) to express our disappointment that the recent final draft of RP+5 does not reflect the wishes expressed by so many in the review process that greenbelting be front and center as we move forward, and to offer a perspective of why it should be so. A key argument in support of a well defined greenbelt for Halifax (HRM), including land now designated Urban Reserve, and for much greater clarity in regard to the permissible uses of all lands is financial, i.e., that substantial savings can be made by concentrating growth in areas currently serviced with water and sewage. We wish to emphasize other benefits, notably for maintaining the quality of life for which Halifax (HRM) has become well-known.

WRWEO is an organization of volunteers who have been carrying out action projects to protect and improve human and natural environments throughout the Woodens River watershed and adjacent areas making up the Five Bridge Lakes Wilderness Area (FBLWA) since 1995. We are perhaps best known for constructing and maintaining The Bluff Wilderness Hiking Trail, ranked one of the 8 best urban wilderness trails in Canada. Over the last 2-3 years, we have seen a marked increase in use of The Bluff Trail. Also, we are pleased to say, involvement in maintenance of the trail has increased and it comes largely from people living in the urban core of HRM. It is this experience that leads us to be strong advocates for greenbelting in the sense advocated by the OurHRM Alliance. Also it has made us keenly aware of the increased pressures on our organized trails as more people discover them.

Greenspace and Quality of Life in HRM

The high level of greenspace* that we currently enjoy, which includes iconic lakes, rivers and coastline, gives the city much of the character that have gained it a reputation as a truly great place to live and work. We enjoy our greenspaces for walks, mountain biking, ATV excursions, wilderness hiking, retreats, fishing, hunting, snow-shoeing,

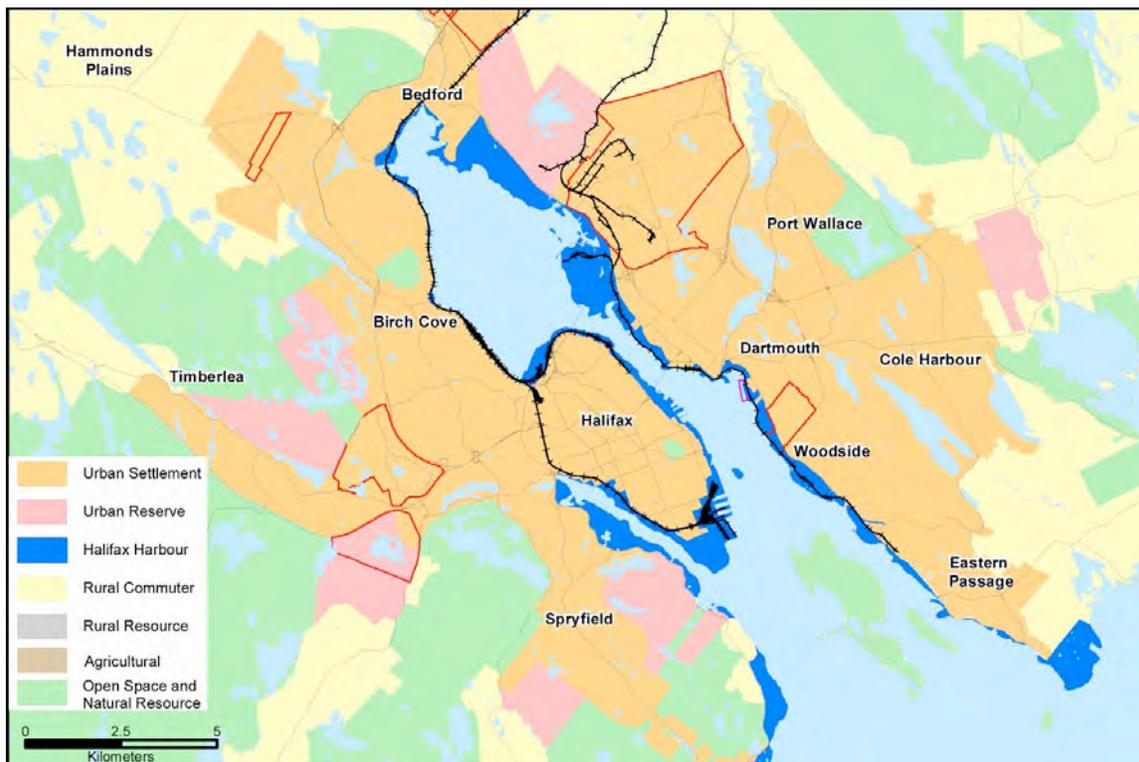
*For the purposes of this document, greenspace refers to any undeveloped land, as well as to parks and protected areas and open water in HRM.

foraging, photography, artistic endeavours, swimming, sailing, paddling... the list goes on and on. Increasingly, students from Primary to University and their mentors are accessing our green spaces to learn about the natural world, and the population at large to realize health and psychological benefits.

The key point: at this juncture, we have a lot of access to greenspace, even truly wild greenspace or wilderness. We do not have to live in the choice locations to enjoy them. Indeed, the ready access to greenspace is arguably the major factor that makes living in the core areas attractive for many people. It is certainly a major factor in the city's consistently high rankings for quality of life (#1 for North American cities in one survey), surely an attribute that attracts students, tourists and businesses to HRM.

The Contribution of Urban Reserve Lands to our Green Space

It can be and is argued that we already have a lot of green space in HRM, that we have enough. Indeed we are blessed with several major Protected Areas and Nature Reserves and numerous Provincial and HRM parks. But those areas are only part of what residents and visitors currently access for greenspace activity. Just as often and perhaps more often, it is undeveloped private or publicly owned land behind one's residence or down the street or a short walk or ride away. In this regard, the lands now designated as Urban Reserve are key assets because of their proximity to Urban Settlement lands.



Urban Reserve lands (pink) can be viewed as strategically located greenspaces. (From Map 2 in RP+5, 3rd Draft.)

Given the evidence that we do not actually need the Urban Reserve lands to accommodate growth over the next few decades and that we can reduce costs by

concentrating growth in currently serviced areas, we should incorporate as much of the Urban Reserve land as possible into a formal HRM greenbelt such as that elaborated by OurHRM Alliance. We should do so (i) simply to maintain the greenspace experiences we presently enjoy, (ii) because with population growth and infill of the land now designated Urban Reserve, increased pressure on the formally designated, greenspaces would seriously degrade their value for recreation and wildlife conservation, and (iii) because incorporating the Urban Reserve lands into a formalized greenbelt has benefits for stewardship. Taking steps now to protect the Urban Reserve Land as greenspace could have the benefits for future populations that we are today afforded by decisions taken in the past to create The Commons and Point Pleasant Park as public spaces. The possibility would still remain to allow settlement of those lands if future generations chose to do so, but the reverse (converting settled lands to open space) would clearly not be possible.

Lakes in the Urban Reserve Lands

It is noteworthy that all blocks of Urban Reserve in the map above include whole lakes or frontage on lakes, some of them amongst the larger lakes of the area. There is a big difference in both access and the experience of enjoying a lake between lakes which are largely settled around their margins (as would be the case if Urban Reserve land is developed) and those that can present unspoiled, Kedji-like landscapes. As well, unsettled lakes have a much better record for water quality than the settled lakes, many of which are periodically closed to swimming because of high bacterial counts. A few people would benefit from settlement around lakes in the Urban Reserve lands, while tens of thousands or more benefit when they are not settled.

Ecological Values of Urban Reserve Lands



Jack Pine barrens in the Williams Lake Watershed.

The ecological values of the Urban Reserve Lands also deserve consideration. Except for Urban Reserve land that abuts the Blue Mountain - Birch Cove Lakes Protected Wilderness Area, it appears such values have not been critically examined. A case in point: Urban Reserve in the Williams Lake area includes Jack Pine Barrens with an association of Jack Pine (a boreal species) and broom crowberry (an Atlantic Coastal Plain species threatened or endangered elsewhere) which is nationally unique and of very limited occurrence in the northeastern U.S., but is quickly being lost in N.S. though development. Elsewhere, Pine Barrens with analogous assemblages and ecology are recognized as endangered ecosystems. In addition, the Williams Lake backlands are made up of very rough, hard rock glacial terrain which cannot be developed without very significant damage to the hydrology of the area.

Growing Community Engagement

As the population of HRM grows, perhaps to a million people within our grandchildren's lifetime, and more people become more aware of and want to access our greenspaces, we will need a high level of community engagement to manage the greenspaces so they are not seriously degraded. That engagement is developing rapidly and is evidence of our population's priorities. On recent "trial builds" for The Bluff Wilderness Hiking Trail, more than 30 individuals volunteered to get wet, muddy, bitten, and exhausted installing stone tread over heavily used, wetter portions of the trail.



Volunteers construct stone tread on The Bluff Trail

What's interesting to the older members of WRWEO who initiated these exercises a few years back and relied on the "party faithful" to participate, is how we got such involvement: some new, much younger (mostly female) members of our board used social media such as Meetup to invite participation and told us 'don't worry, they'll come out'. They did, and the volunteers were of all ages and came mostly from the urban core areas. Now our limitation is not getting people out, but just organizing the events; even in that regard, new volunteers are coming forth.

That's the experience of only one organization. There are many more outdoor oriented groups such as the Sackville River Association, the Young Naturalists Club, many hiking/walking, and paddling groups, and more are appearing, formally or

informally constituted such as the Halifax Outdoor Adventurers (founded in 2008 with 2,267 members), the Halifax Adventurous Explorers (founded in 2013 with 586 members) and the Halifax Adventure Seekers (founded in 2013 with 494 members). The growing interest in enjoying and conserving our natural areas is also well illustrated by the opposition to sewage and water extension on Purcell's Road, which comes fundamentally out of fear that it will open up the backlands to development. That opposition comes as much from residents on the Peninsula as it does from the immediate residents of the area.

Conclusion

There are many other points that could be made about the value of greenbelting for facilitating sustainable growth in our community and maintaining greenspaces for recreation and conservation. Most have been well and repeatedly made and are acknowledged if not acted upon in the 3rd draft of RP+5. We have focused on the Urban Reserve lands because those are the areas that are under the most immediate threat from inaction, and that in many ways are the most valuable to the quality of life afforded by HRM because of their strategic locations in relation to Urban Settlement lands.

Thus we appeal to the Mayor and Councilors to reject the RP+5 Third Draft and insist that staff come back with a plan in which greenbelting is applied as a system for directing growth and not simply for managing open space, that it include the Urban Reserve lands, and that there be absolute clarity in regard to the use of those lands (i.e., eliminate any wiggle room). In the meantime, we urge council to pass a formal motion instructing staff that no applications for rezoning/development of any portion of the Urban Reserve lands be considered.

On behalf of the WRWEO board, I thank you for receiving and considering these comments.

David Patriquin

David Patriquin
WRWEO Conservation Committee

cc: WRWEO, OurHRM Alliance