



The Case for Building Complete Communities in Halifax Regional Municipality

The Problem

Urban Sprawl

In the 1950s, Canada saw the creation of suburbs to accommodate the population boom that followed the second world war. Life in the 1950s looked a lot different than it does today, urban planners and other built environment professionals designed suburbs based on the assumption that one family member would drive to work every day, while the other maintained the house and cared for the children.



This suburban expansion saw the onset of environmentalists' worst nightmare: urban sprawl. Sprawl bulldozes green space to accommodate for single-detached homes and private vehicles. Sprawl leads to vehicle dependency, unaffordability, and increased greenhouse gas emissions. Our society has changed significantly since the 1950s and the needs and expectations of our communities have changed too.

So how do we change our communities to meet our needs while curbing sprawl?

Enter, complete communities. Complete communities arrived in planning theory in the 90s and have stuck around since. The tricky part of complete communities is that we can't start from scratch. In the 50s when we were designing the suburbs we see today, we had lots of space to work with. Now, because we don't want to tear up more greenspace (agricultural land, wetlands, parks, forests), we're left with what some might call suburban "retrofits". That is, rethinking our existing suburbs to figure out how we can add to them and enhance them to suit the unique needs of those who live in them presently, as well as those who will live there in the future.



Pictured above: King's Wharf mixed-use development project on Halifax Harbour

The Solution

Building Complete Communities

There are many different maps and images that try to visualize what a complete community might look like. Every community is different and will have a different combination of housing, retail/commercial, public services, schools, parks, and sustainable transportation routes. This graphic is useful in that it could be anywhere. We can see a denser core with lots of amenities, connection to a central transportation route, and a mix of housing types ranging from apartments to single-detached homes and everything in between (often called missing middle housing).



HOUSING
low, medium,
and high density



COMMERCIAL
offices, stores,
and local
business



PUBLIC SERVICES
hospitals,
libraries, and
community
centres



EDUCATION
institutions,
schools
child-care



PARKS
playgrounds,
greenspace,
and nature



MOBILITY
buses, cycling,
and walking
infrastructure

Questions to Ask Yourself

What if you could decide the housing type that makes the most sense for your lifestyle (apartment, townhouse, single detached, etc.) within the community you already know and love?

Think about your own community, is there a strip mall or plaza where you do most of your shopping?

What if it was easier to walk to most of your needs than to drive?

What if more of your daily trips were also located in and around this area?

What if transit and active transportation to get to this central area was made easier?

These are the questions that have led planners to complete communities.

These ideas have stemmed from reimagining communities to make modern life easier. Think of how your life might change if you didn't have to make separate stops to get to the grocery store, the park, school, or your place of work. **Would you save time? See more of your friends and family? Save on gas and feel more inclined to walk or bike to your necessities?** These are all possibilities that arise when we rethink our communities to suit our lifestyles and needs.

Benefits of Complete Communities

Complete community benefits can be sorted into three intersecting categories:

environmental, economic, and social. By accounting for all its residents' needs, a complete community facilitates social and economic prosperity, and does so in a sustainable way that protects and enhances our natural environment.



Environmental

- Preservation of valuable greenspace, like wetlands and forests
- Reduction in greenhouse gas emissions
- Increased resilience to climate change

Not only do these spaces have immense natural, social, and cultural value; they help us fight climate change by sequestering large amounts of carbon from our air, improving air quality and reducing the greenhouse gas emissions driving the climate crisis.

Economic

- Increased efficiency of services
- Reduced service costs to taxpayer
- Reinvestment of savings into communities
- Improved housing affordability

A mix of housing types (such as apartments or townhouses) create variation in the price to live in a neighbourhood, allowing people of different income levels to live in the communities that best suit their wants and needs. Further, it allows those who need affordable housing options greater access to those units, as there is less competition for them.



Social

- Increased opportunities for social interaction
- Encourage use of active transportation like walking or cycling
- More effective public security, such as fire protection and healthcare

Increased housing choice allows for different demographics to choose the housing option that best fits their lifestyle. This means that demographics like seniors can stay in their communities longer and use shared amenities like community centers and libraries which provide programming and support for all age groups.



Barriers to building Complete Communities

There are several notable barriers to creating complete communities. But first, it is important to understand the governance structure surrounding urban planning.

By creating plans and by-laws that manage land use, planners decide where and how communities will grow and be shaped.

Municipal planners act under the direction of their **City Council** and abide by their **Municipal Government Act**. Beyond that, Municipal government is empowered through legislation enacted by the **Provincial government** and are often referred to as **“creatures of the Province”**. This governance structure is important to keep in mind when we think about how we can create change in our communities. At every level of community planning, the following can be barriers to complete community development:



Restrictive Zoning

In many suburban communities, land use is zoned as ‘R1’ meaning only single-detached houses can be built on a lot. So, if we wanted a mix of housing in a neighbourhood (like allowing for a secondary unit) planners would first need the direction of Council, and then would have to amend the land use by-law for the area to allow for different housing types.



Drawing by Justis Wiles

Barriers to building Complete Communities

Incentivizing and Subsidizing Sprawl

Developers are required to apply for building permits and pay the Municipality a development charge (DC) when they want to begin a new project. Often, DCs are more expensive in urban areas, than in underdeveloped areas, like a forest or wetland. This DC structure incentivizes developers to build on valuable greenspace, simply because cities make it the cheaper option.

Communities with more people per square kilometer (higher densities) are also much cheaper for municipalities to provide services to. Consider this: It would take a lot less time to pick up garbage bins from 10 people living in a multi-unit building sharing a central garbage, than it would to drive to 10 individual houses. The cost of providing these services is the same for everyone in a city, regardless of how efficient their housing type is. Meaning, those living in denser areas are subsidizing the cost of services for sprawling areas. Rethinking some of these charge structures could save municipalities a lot of money. In fact, a study done by Stantec in 2013 found that HRM could save \$3 billion by putting a cost on sprawl.

Community Resistance

Despite the benefits of complete communities, plans to implement denser housing or amenities in the suburbs are often met with community resistance. Preventing development in existing neighbourhoods is detrimental for many reasons: It increases housing prices, feeds segregation by income and race, contributes to carbon emissions, and creates gentrification pressure in other areas. Property owners that resist new development are often referred to as having NIMBY (not in my backyard) attitudes; NIMBY attitudes can stall projects, making it difficult to facilitate complete community development.



How Can You Get Involved?

Do you want to see your community transformed into a complete one? Here are a few ways you can get involved and have your say:



Give Feedback to Planners

Public consultation is one of the most important parts of the planning process. Whether it's plan creation, review, or budget season, your voice is wanted and needed. The Halifax Regional Municipality uses the 'Shape Your City' platform to ask for community input on current projects. You can find more information [here](#).

Contact Your Representatives

Let your Municipal Councillors and Provincial MLAs know that complete communities are important to you. Contact them and find out more about how they're supporting complete community development at the municipal and provincial level. Find out who your Councillor is [here](#) and MLA is [here](#).



Talk to Your Neighbours

There are many informal opportunities to get the ball rolling in your community. You may have a neighbourhood advisory group or residents' association that is already discussing how to improve your community. If not, chat with your neighbours, see if there's some common ground about what type of land use you would like to see permitted in your community!

Additional Resources

Interested in learning more about urban planning and complete communities? Here are a few resources we enjoy!

Article: The End of Home Ownership

by Michelle Cyca

This article explores Canada's housing crisis, and the factors that led to the state of housing today.

Read it here - macleans.ca/longforms/the-end-of-homeownership

Book: Perverse Cities: Hidden Subsidies, Wonky Policy, and Urban Sprawl

by Pamela Blais

Perverse Cities explores how sprawling development is incentivized by policies and pricing- creating extensive (but fixable) barriers to complete community development.

Book: Soft City: Building Density for Everyday Life

by David Sim

Soft City is a great read for those looking to learn more about how we use building design to help create complete communities. The book has many visuals showcasing different building types, their organization, and how we interact with this built form, making it easy to visualize how our environments impact our quality of life.

Video: A 'Special' Solution to the Housing Crisis

Watch it here - bit.ly/ASpecialSolutionVideo

Uytae Lee's Stories About Here

This video provides a case study about missing middle housing in Vancouver. Missing middle housing is housing which falls somewhere between a single-detached house and a high-rise apartment building (something Canada has very little). Part of making complete communities more equitable is making sure everyone has a home conducive to their unique wants and needs. This video explores barriers to building missing middle housing and potential solutions.

Video: Can Infill Development Save Cities?

Watch it here - bit.ly/CityBeautifulVideo

This video, by City Beautiful (A YouTube channel that has many educational urban planning videos) explores infill development and the policies that make infill possible. Infill development is a big part of creating complete communities. Think of infill as the process of taking underused or unproductive lots and transforming them into something more beneficial to a community's needs!