

Have You Heard of HalifACT?

A LOOK INTO HRM'S CLIMATE ACTION PLAN

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What is HalifACT?

If you haven't heard of Halifax's new Climate Action Plan (HalifACT), don't worry; neither have 80 per cent of HRM residents. In simplest terms, HalifACT is Halifax's response to our unique concerns regarding climate change. The Plan is an all-inclusive project, working towards fighting climate change through a multi-levelled approach, addressing issues concerning the economy, infrastructure, and green space within the city. It's a robust plan that has been in the works since the Halifax Regional Council declared a climate emergency in January 2019. The declaration acknowledged the severe impacts climate change will have not just on the city's infrastructure, but also on the natural environments and people within the municipality's borders. The Plan also acknowledges our role in climate change, not only in causing this crisis but in resolving it. As Mayor Mike Savage is quoted in the foreword of the Plan:

“These changes are caused by human action and will only be reversed by human action. We are feeling the impacts already, and there is no longer any doubt that urgent change is needed. This Plan is a roadmap of Halifax's response to address the climate crisis, stimulate the economy, create new jobs, and build a more resilient and healthy future.”

TAKE ACTION

To get involved, reach out to your councillor, and tell them to fund climate action now! For a more hands-on approach, join one of EAC's volunteer action teams, like the Energy Action Team or Urban Development Advocacy Team; or connect with local climate leaders: Climate Emergency Unit, Halifax Climate Hub, or HCI3 (Halifax Climate Investment, Innovation and Impact Fund).

This all sounds promising, and it's a significant step forward in tackling the environmental issues we are facing today.

The Plan takes a two-tiered approach, with more pressing concerns brought to the forefront. This includes immediately lowering the city's carbon-footprint so that global warming is kept to the allotted increase of 1.5 degrees by 2030. The timelines for completing longer-term goals, such as establishing a 100 per cent renewable energy power grid, are extended to 2050.

The measures included in HalifACT are intended to combat and prepare for the extreme weather events that are predicted if we exceed 1.5-degrees of global temperature rise. The Plan explains that while we have already experienced some of these projected weather events within the past few years, we can expect "higher temperatures, more heatwaves, more rain and snow and an increasing number of more severe storms, flooding events and wildfires." It further explains that "extreme weather drives other climate hazards such as sea-level rise, decreased snowpack and unpredictable runoff, and increases in invasive species and vector-borne diseases".

Acting on Climate Together – How Does This Impact Residents?

As a result of the dire future we can expect if the city remains stagnant, this Plan is significant, especially in its thoroughness and careful consideration of the impacts on Halifax residents. There are four significant impacts HRM residents can expect with the implementation of the HalifACT Plan:

- The first major change will be a change in the job market: the transition to sustainability will create new job opportunities and open up more spaces in existing industries. The Plan is expected to generate approximately 170,000 person years of employment between 2020 and 2050. This is an average of 5,500 annually, a significant increase to the projected status quo job prospects.
- Residents can also expect to see changes in buildings, whether through new buildings going up or through retrofitting old buildings to adhere to new sustainable regulations. This is a key aspect of the plan. Since 2016, buildings accounted for 70 per cent of all energy used in Halifax. New builds and retrofits aimed at increasing energy-efficient will help to bring this number down. Enhancing building performance will also extend into making buildings more resilient to extreme weather, such as flooding and heat. Those projected to be at most risk of the effects of climate change are anticipated to be prioritized in the city's infrastructure and retrofit plan.
- Halifax residents will also see a transition in the city's power grid, through to 2050. Plans are in the works to transition the current energy sector to one that is 100 per cent renewable. Besides the obvious benefits of lowering our carbon footprint through renewable energy, residents can also expect fewer power outages as the city moves towards reliable energy storage.
- There is also a push towards naturalization – “an ecological approach to landscape management that enhances biodiversity and improves ecosystem health and resilience in an urban environment”, as explained in the HalifACT Plan. Naturalization is expected to lower maintenance requirements and costs in the city and provide much more natural green space for residents within the city and native wildlife. Naturalization has already taken shape in some parks within the municipality. Some of the benefits are improved biodiversity, as well as improved air quality, reduced urban heat effects, mitigated storm run-off, and an ecosystem's ability to cope with extreme weather.

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Taking Personal Action

HalifACT acknowledges that the city can't reach its goals by itself and, as a result, has provided Halifax residents with ways to get involved in reducing their carbon footprint and supporting their community in fighting climate change. Some of these ways include:

- Reaching out to Efficiency Nova Scotia to transition appliances to more energy-efficient ones.
- Washing clothes in cold water, hang-drying clothes, and unplugging electronics when not in use.
- Taking up a green-commute by switching to electric vehicles, walking, cycling, taking public transit, or carpooling.
- Buying local and investing in more climate-friendly meals, such as purchasing foods in season or participating in a community garden.
- Using voting power to inform candidates that addressing climate change is important to local voters.

Carbon, Carbon Everywhere

If you haven't noticed by now, much of the HalifACT climate plan focuses on lowering carbon emissions. The bulk of the Plan is focused on reducing the city's carbon footprint. This is a good step for the city, especially in light of the city's short-term plans to create a carbon budget and its long-term goal of establishing a net-zero carbon municipal service. However, there is a sense that this over-focus on carbon-based strategies misses out on other key pathways to address climate change.

One aspect that seems to be missing in the city's focus on emissions reduction and climate mitigation is climate adaptation. Averting the worst effects of climate change should be a goal of the Plan, it is clear however that we will not be able to do this entirely. We are already experiencing the effects of climate change here in Halifax, and so any comprehensive plan must include adaptation. The Plan makes references to climate adaptation in the discussion of retrofitting, however, this doesn't do enough to combat the projected weather the city can expect.

Climate adaptation requires a more robust shift in our social, institutional, and structural processes. For example, it might well require building sea walls within the city to counter rising sea levels, especially against storm surges, or creating green roofs to moderate urban heat effects. It could even extend to reforestation within the municipality to encourage strong ecosystems. These are larger projects aimed at accepting that our future includes climate change and that adaptation is necessary.

The city may not yet be at a point to adequately address these issues. However, we can expect an update to the Plan by 2030, when the first tier of the HalifACT Plan is implemented. Then we will get a better sense of what our future will look like. HalifACT is a good starting point for the city in confronting the problems associated with climate change. Carbon-reduction is a significant step, but the plan could be further diversified to include plans of adaptation for our projected climate.