



Urban Development Institute of Nova Scotia

Priorities for 2011 Urban Development Institute of Nova Scotia

In the Fall of 2010 the Board of Directors held its annual strategic planning session for the purpose of identifying a list of priorities for the forthcoming year.

In this period of prolonged economic recovery, the Board is particularly concerned that government regulations and operating procedures (both locally and at the provincial level) have the potential to limit our ability to carry on business in a fair and predictable manner. With this concern in mind, the Board resolved to pursue the following list of issues in no particular order of importance:

Wetlands

The Province of Nova Scotia has enacted new regulations that will severely limit the ability to infill wetlands in Nova Scotia – this regardless of the size of a wetland or its environmental significance. While UDI agrees with the need to protect important wetland habitat, we have consistently cautioned the Province that its intended approach to delineation, alteration, and compensation is over-bearing and counter-productive to the objective of compact urban development. More specifically, the objectives of the Regional Plan will not be realized if the Province moves forward with its development guidelines as presented to industry in 2009.

Not all wetlands are equal in terms of size or environmental importance. The Province appreciates this point, especially in serviced areas where the provision of municipal water reduces the need for ground water replenishment; furthermore, the requirement to balance pre- and post- development stormwater flows manages the storm water retention aspect of wetlands. Still, the over-riding objective of “no net loss” of wetlands prevents the Province from enacting regulations that strike a balance between environmental protection and the need to maintain compact urban development patterns and manageable suburban growth opportunities.

UDI has provided meaningful input on proposed regulations and continues to offer advice to the Province as it moves closer to confirming operational guidelines. The Board has resolved to maintain an active role on this issue in order to ensure that development can continue to proceed in a manner that promotes sustainability and environmental awareness.

Fees and Charges

It seems that with each passing day a new fee is introduced or a new procedure adopted that increases the cost of land development and in turn, new home construction. In recent years, our industry has been bombarded with Capital Cost Charges, increased permit and inspection fees, and heightened technical requirements for new road construction and municipal services. The cumulative impact of these initiatives has been to:



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- Increase the overall cost of development and new home construction;
- Force many developers to look outside the urban and suburban areas of HRM where development charges, technical regulations, and permit fees are less onerous;
- Reduce the ratio of new home ownership to rental accommodations throughout the HRM;
- Increase developer risk.

It is now commonplace for HRM and Halifax Water to increase fees and/or enact new regulations that increase development costs. Both believe that it is within their operating mandates to recover costs from developers for services provided. As an industry, we can accept this logic to a certain point. However, neither the Municipality nor the Water Commission appear willing to engage in meaningful discussions regarding operational efficiencies, response times, or performance based design – all items that could reduce operating costs and therefore the need to increase fees. UDI will be seeking more input and accountability from government agencies with the view to maintaining reasonable development costs throughout the HRM.

Municipal Servicing Specifications

The time has come to engage both HRM and the Halifax Regional Water Commission in a formal review of both the “Red” and “White” Book. Far too many changes have been made of late to both servicing design manuals without meaningful input from industry. UDI intends to formally request that both the Municipality and the Water Commission establish a review committee made up of municipal officials and industry representatives for the purpose of a cover-to-cover review of the specifications. This will be a lengthy affair but one that is necessary if we are to realize a balanced approach to municipal service design throughout the HRM.

Affordability

New home construction is declining while rental housing is on the rise. Some will hail this as a step towards increased density and a compact urban form – the new urbanism! However, others will suggest that such shifts are the direct result of increased costs that have put the concept of home ownership out of the reach of many potential homebuyers.

UDI supports a proactive approach to mixed-use development, small lot housing options, flex housing, and income earning while at home. As such, we believe that HRM needs to be more aggressive in terms of finding innovative ways to promote affordable housing and increased ownership ratios. Rules and regulations need to be reviewed in the context of overall cost and the impact on affordability. Land use patterns and lot sizes need to be adjusted to reflect smaller household sizes and dual income potential. Finally, more housing choices need to be introduced for an aging population that is not yet ready for a “condo in the sky”.

UDI is committed to increasing the dialogue on affordable housing opportunities throughout the HRM. This needs to become a political issue as a run-up to the next municipal election. We need leaders who are prepared to advance



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public policy and development regulations that ensure long-term sustainability while at the same time maintain opportunities for home ownership at historic norms.

Economic Impact Study

UDI believes that most people do not fully appreciate the positive impact that land development and new housing has on the economic landscape. More importantly, many policy makers and regulatory agencies fail to understand that their actions can have a significant impact on an industry that routinely employs thousands of trades people and professionals.

In order to fully understand the importance of our industry to the regional economy, UDI has engaged a local firm to prepare an economic overview of the land development business in HRM. The overview will also look at the importance of new home construction, including multiple-unit construction. The report is due in late winter and will be circulated to members for review and comment before release to the general public. It is anticipated that the findings of this review will help enlighten regulatory and policy makers as to the importance of maintaining a vibrant development business in this area.

Approval Times

Our members continue to express concern about the amount of time it takes to process various development applications including but not limited to: rezoning requests, MPS amendments, and development agreements.

HRM has undertaken to streamline the process as it relates to the downtown core. However, HRM by Design impacts only a small area of the municipality and does nothing to improve processing times for the bulk of development in the region.

UDI will be calling upon HRM administrators to once again review processing times with the view to increasing operational efficiencies and reduce processing timelines. In times of economic uncertainty, the risk to project viability increases dramatically when processing times are extended and the level of uncertainty as to outcome remains high. It is our belief that HRM has lost sight of the importance to moving applications through the system quickly, preferring instead to engage in protracted public consultation and nit-picking reviews of development applications. This needs to change if we are to maintain a healthy development industry in the years to come.

Brownfield Legislation

UDI believes that Brownfield developments hold great potential in terms of increased density and redevelopment potential within the core areas of HRM. We will be requesting formal discussions with HRM officials in order to determine their understanding of the potential for Brownfield development as well as the need to ensure proactive approaches to government legislation at the local, provincial, and national level. Compared to other urban areas in



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Canada and the USA, Halifax does not have a noticeable inventory of Brownfield sites. Still, there is a need to create a regulatory environment that encourages the active redevelopment of such properties in a manner that is profitable to private sector investment.

Clearly, UDI has set an aggressive agenda for 2011. In this post-recession era, every effort must be made to maintain a level playing field for all stakeholders. The importance of our industry to regional economy is significant and must be protected against overzealous regulations and fee structures. As such, we invite your comments and suggestions as we move forward in the new year.

Respectfully,

J. Michael Hanusiak
On behalf of the Board of Directors

