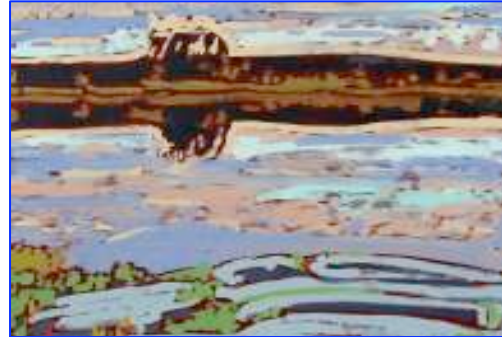


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### **Summary and recommendations for the HRM Regional Plan Five Year Review (RP+5)**

***The Purcell's Cove/Williams Lake/Herring Cove Backlands:*** Within five minutes of HRM's city centre lies a unique wilderness area that contains six lakes and three ponds, hills with spectacular views of the whole area and dozens of kilometers of informal hiking and biking trails. Our community believes this area must be protected from development so that it can become a resource for the city and an essential part of what makes Halifax a destination of note. While the Regional Municipal Planning Strategy (Draft 2.0) contains laudable basic principles and objectives aimed at the stewardship of just such areas, its approach and key strategies do not yet offer concrete assurances that protection will occur. In light of this we make the following recommendations.

- 1. That the regional planning strategy, under Section 2, identify the entire Backlands as an area in which HRM must exercise a high level of caution to protect the watersheds and wetlands.*** At best, this would mean prohibiting further development entirely. At the least, it must involve limiting further development to what is environmentally sound and does not involve the extension of sewer and water services with its consequent blasting and destruction of watersheds and wildlife habitat.
- 2. That the revised strategy's endorsement of Discretionary Approvals for development (see Section 9.7), specifically those permitted under G-16 (p. 99), be withdrawn or modified.*** As it stands, Clause G-16 allows for just the sort of incremental encroachments that are completely at odds with development that is planned to offer protections in accord with the environmental, recreational and community-based objectives of the strategy as a whole.
- 3. That the Backlands be explicitly identified for consideration as part of the proposed system of urban greenbelts in Chapter 2 of the regional planning strategy.*** We are aware that much of the work in defining and identifying greenbelt areas within HRM remains to be done. However, many opportunities will be lost if nothing is done to prevent encroachment and incremental destruction prior to the completion of the mandated work to establish greenbelts. We know that there is currently an oversupply of serviced building lots in HRM and we fully support revised targets for urban core development leading to less building in the suburban areas surrounding the city center. The revised planning strategy must make clear that HRM intends to consider placing areas currently zoned as Urban Reserve Areas within the greenbelt system.

**4. That the unique historical, cultural and aesthetic aspects of the Backlands be explicitly recognized in Chapter 7 of the regional planning strategy.** Halifax is a city that needs to be seen as part-and-parcel of its remarkable seascapes and landscapes. The Backlands provide a rare opportunity for this fusion of land, sea, sky and city to be fully realized, and they provide inspiration for local artists and painters to celebrate our beautiful surroundings. They contain many sites of historical significance such as Mi'kmaq gathering areas and portages, the remains from one of Canada's first rail systems, WWII battery placements and the 18<sup>th</sup> century military road that runs past Flat Lake. These features should be included in description of the city's cultural heritage.

**Who we are and why we care**

**Our group:** The current Purcell's Cove Neighbourhood Committee (PCNC), formed in 2012, evolved from various community groups stretching back to the 1970s. Its main aim is to promote, protect and provide a voice for Purcell's Cove as a unique mixed residential and multi-use recreational area within HRM. PCNC is an affiliate of Our HRM Alliance. It coordinates closely with other local groups including those in Williams Lake, Ferguson's Cove and "Area 1" which is the locality between Williams Lake Road and Oceanview Drive. Our website can be found at <http://www.pcnc.chebucto.org/>.

**Our community vision:** Purcell's Cove is a community with many outstanding features, near the heart of HRM. Only a few minutes commute from the Rotary, it is a special blend of suburban and rural, residential areas and 'pocket wilderness'. Its main features are the cove itself, with its small yacht anchorage as well as unobstructed views of the harbour, Point Pleasant Park and McNab's Island, and a substantial and unique Backlands area that encompasses undeveloped and minimally-developed private land, Crown land and a segment of conservation lands administered by the Nova Scotia Nature Trust.

The roughly 350 residents of the Purcell's Cove area include young families, artists, cultural workers, retirees, professionals, tradespeople, service workers, health workers and the self-employed. It is not a suburb of the city – it is a picturesque corner with substantial natural beauty, a unique social and historical heritage, a special community spirit and a reputation as a welcoming retreat just a stone's throw from the urban core.

**Why we want to protect the Backlands:** The Backlands is considered to be the wilderness land running between Williams Lake Road in the north and Powers Pond (Herring Cove) in the south, and between



Purcell's Cove Road in the east and Herring Cove Road in the west. We believe that one of the most remarkable aspects of the Backlands is the location of this extensive wilderness area virtually at the city's doorstep. Not everyone in HRM is aware of the existence of the Backlands and the fact that they provide a vital ecological link or 'bridge' between outlying natural areas of HRM and the urban core. The existence of such stunningly beautiful and largely

untouched land with outstanding physical features and lovely views and vistas, so close to the urban core, provides HRM with the potential to become a global model for eco-friendly, community-led natural/recreational resource protection

**Geology, flora, fauna and watershed:** The Backlands' geology is characterized by striking 'whaleback' granite outcroppings and glacial erratic boulders shaped by the last glacial age. The granite itself is 380 million years old, while the whalebacks were shaped approximately 10,000 years ago. There are at least three scenic high points in the Backlands with an elevation of roughly 80 metres or 250 feet, including Piggy Mountain with clear views of Chebucto Head and peninsular Halifax.

In addition to the approximately 100 acres of land administered by the Nova Scotia Nature Trust around Purcell's Pond (see [www.nsnt.ca](http://www.nsnt.ca)), other groups such as the Williams Lake Conservation Company (WLCC, [www.williamslakecc.org](http://www.williamslakecc.org)) and the McIntosh Run Watershed Association (MRWA, [www.mcintoshrun.ca](http://www.mcintoshrun.ca)) are concerned with and working actively to publicize and protect the unique features of the Backlands. The WLCC has commissioned several excellent studies pertaining to birds, watershed features and vegetation.

The watersheds of the Backlands form a contiguous area of granite outcrops and wet valleys which are home to a remarkable amount of wildlife. Within the lands administered by the Nova Scotia Nature Trust alone, dozens of species of plants, birds, lichens and insects have been observed. There are also regular sightings of rabbit, beaver, muskrat, mink, coyote, fox and deer. The uniqueness and rarity of these pristine urban fresh water landscapes and watersheds form a 'jewel in the HRM crown' of such value as to warrant further consideration for serious protection and stewardship.

**Cultural, aesthetic, historical, social and recreational:** Indian Cove at the north end of Purcell's Cove (formerly Mackerel Cove) was a long-established site where the Mi'kmaq fished and celebrated festivals.

Indian Path nearby was the head of a network of trails used to access the fishing lakes and hunting grounds in the Backlands. Established in 1759 at the founding of Halifax, the historic granite and slate quarries of the Backlands were used to build the forts, batteries and many historic Halifax buildings. The quarries extended from Indian Cove to the plateau 70 metres above, which are still strewn with significant industrial artefacts. In 1834 the quarries started using a steam



railroad (possibly the first industrial railway in Nova Scotia) to access the quarries and the old tramway bed is well preserved. Old maps in the Nova Scotia archives show a road connecting the military batteries above Ferguson's Cove with Spryfield through the heart of the Backlands. Although mostly overgrown, some segments show sturdy stonework beds.

The Backlands contain an extensive network of informal trails for hiking and mountain biking and it is regularly accessed by such groups as the Halifax Field Naturalists and the Chebucto Hiking Club. The MRWA has done a remarkable job in mapping out potential formal trails on existing HRM and Crown

lands in the southern Backlands adjoining Herring Cove, and we fully support their efforts to establish a trail network that can be accessed and enjoyed by anyone in HRM.

The Backlands is also the subject of local painters and photographers whose works of art remind us that the extraordinary rugged beauty of the area is worth appreciating for its own sake. For example, the work of landscape painter Geoffrey Grantham, recently chosen as a CBC 'Sharing the View' artist, provides a compelling first-hand visual record of the Backlands' many moods and seasons (see [www.swoonfineart.com/index.php?/site/artist/geoffrey\\_grantham](http://www.swoonfineart.com/index.php?/site/artist/geoffrey_grantham) ).

### **Our concerns about the HRM Regional Municipal Planning Strategy (Draft 2.0)**

**Greenbelting as a concept and practice:** Given our deep-rooted interest in preserving the quality of life in HRM, PCNC welcomes the chance to respond to the current draft of the HRM regional plan. We see this as an opportunity to share with others the special features and assets of the Backlands in its entirety, as well as highlight the need to provide effective regional stewardship for these areas. As a member of Our HRM Alliance, we fully endorse the focus on the use of greenbelting to concentrate growth in the urban core and preserve natural areas and eco-services (see [www.ourhrmalliance.ca/1-use-greenbelting](http://www.ourhrmalliance.ca/1-use-greenbelting)).

We believe that the urban greenbelt concept presented in Chapter 2 of the draft planning strategy is very important for the future preservation and effective collective use of the Backlands, and we applaud its prominent placement in the plan. The inclusion of this concept implicitly recognizes that a regional municipality is much more than simply an area in which economic development takes place. It is also a location to foster a rare synthesis between quality of life, social/cultural values, human well-being and the environment. However, like several other groups in the HRM, we have deep concerns about how this concept is presented and the lack of specific description about how it is to be put into practice. We would like to highlight the following issues:

- ***There is still a significant gap between the theory of the urban greenbelt and its practical application.*** While the principles on page 8 of the plan allude to the need to ensure opportunities for protection of open space, wilderness, natural beauty and sensitive environmental areas, these ideas are not yet enshrined at a functional or practical level in Chapter 2. To us, 'greenbelt' means lands that communicate and connect as well as allow enjoyment of wildlife and expansive natural areas, not just isolated corridors, pockets or small blocks that are hived off from developed areas. Specific areas with at least the strong potential for urban greenbelt inclusion (such as the Backlands) need to be more explicitly highlighted in the plan.
- ***In-depth consideration of which areas to include in the greenbelt is deferred to the creation of a Greenbelting and Public Spaces Priorities Plan at some future date.*** While in theory this sounds fine, in practice it does not foster any confidence among our group and many others that the greenbelt plan is likely to be finalized before further development of the Backlands takes place. We are worried that culturally and aesthetically significant areas

will not be protected from imminent private development *before* greenbelting is seriously discussed as an option. The Backlands contain what could be considered as ‘regionally significant’ vistas and views that are part of our cultural and aesthetic heritage as HRM and they are equally important to the cultural richness of our area as are any built heritage areas. For the sake of consultation and fairness, it is important to mention in the plan that *all* areas with identified greenbelt potential are open for discussion and inclusion in spite of current zoning designations such as “urban reserve”.

- ***The linkages between innovative economic diversification and ecological protection are not very explicit in the current draft of the regional planning strategy.*** We believe that more could be done to cross-reference the advantages of green-centred economic growth and clean technology with the need for an urban greenbelt that includes the Backlands. Due to their proximity, there is huge scope for innovative new ventures in the Backlands such as forest schools, art education retreats, artists-in-the-environment workshops, ecological stewardship centres and eco-tourism. These types of low-intrusion initiatives can exist side-by-side with protected recreational facilities and extensive wilderness areas.
- ***Inclusion of the Backlands in the urban greenbelt can assist HRM in meeting its targets for urban densification and contribute to the reduction of HRM’s carbon footprint.*** We believe strongly that the vision of a wilderness greenbelt area surrounding compact urban growth areas is a means not only of promoting a healthy community but also attracting more people to live within the urban core in line with overall HRM urban densification targets. Their proximity to the urban core makes them an ideal location for HRM to showcase the advantages of having a scenic wilderness area close to downtown which can be reached by bicycle and public transit. Further suburban sprawl can be avoided by leaving the Backlands an attractive undeveloped recreational area with easy access to the city’s downtown. Citizens will not have to move into outlying areas to enjoy the benefits of being close to extensive forested areas which also have the benefit of helping to keep the city’s air clean.

Overall, we believe that there is significant prestige to be gained for HRM (both nationally and internationally) if the true potential of the urban greenbelt is realized. The Backlands, incorporating the McIntosh Run watershed, is the great landscape entity that remains so close to the downtown core. To lose these would seriously undermine HRM’s potential as a socially and ecologically progressive community, and also alienate many sympathetic citizens. If some aspects of wilderness remain as close as possible, there is likelihood of enhanced appreciation of its benefits. There is an emphatic need for the draft planning strategy to incorporate serious consideration of these issues as a counterweight to the widely perceived pro-development bias of other sections of the document.

***Urban reserve, discretionary approvals and Clause G-16:*** Portions of the Backlands are currently Crown or HRM land, but in the area immediately south of Williams Lake and behind Purcell’s Cove itself there remain private lands zoned as ‘urban reserve’. In theory, the urban reserve designation allows for slow-paced, ‘as-needed’ development. In practice, however, there is deep distrust of the political process in

our community because we are convinced that private developers, bureaucrats and politicians are unwilling to consider alternate visions for this area.

Clause G-16 has become the focus of concern for many groups who have commented on the draft planning strategy because it allows precisely the kind of development via a discretionary process that heads us down a slippery slope and away from the main objectives of the planning process. Clause G-16 permits Council to allow development in property that “abuts” land that has been built upon. It permits development in property that is across the road from land that has previously been developed. But, one might ask whether there is any land that is not abutting or adjacent and therefore immune to development using this discretionary power?

A more detailed sub-area plan is still needed for the entire area surrounding Purcell’s Cove which will help to identify the unique assets and opportunities of the Backlands and adjoining areas, *before* more development takes place. Some segments have already been subject to residential housing development and there are concerns that water quality and semi-rare species of plants and insects have been compromised. Studies are on-going to determine the extent of this intrusion. There are huge (and to us, fully justified) concerns that the significant natural, aesthetic, historic and recreational opportunities presented by the Backlands will be lost before there is a chance to consider the options. Overall, given the sensitivity of the situation, we do not believe that there exist sufficient checks and balances against the potential abuse of Clause G-16 by developers.

We understand that there are some qualifications on the discretion endorsed by Clause G-16. It specifies that amendments may be made only “[p]rovided other policies of this Plan are satisfied...” (p. 99). Given the policies identified throughout the plan, one might suppose that this discretion was already highly limited. It would seem, for example, that discretion would be limited by the policies spelled out in Chapter 2, E-1 where subsections d, k, o, p, and q, require protection of trail and greenway networks, wetlands, environmentally sensitive areas, natural corridors and cultural landscapes respectively. But this clause really points to work that remains to be done. Without specific directions, discretionary approvals can proceed without consideration of what *should be* included within the Open Space and Natural Resource Designation. If Clause G-16 is not dropped, we recommend that the revised planning strategy identify mandatory policies that *must be* considered before granting discretionary approval for any development.

In relation to any or all of the above comments and input, our working group (see below) involved in the preparation of this letter would be very happy to provide any further information as required. We are able to share references and background documentation to support the points made in this letter. We look forward to receiving acknowledgement from the HRM Regional Planning Office regarding our input and we hope that our information will contribute to a more precise and responsive regional planning strategy.

Yours sincerely,  
Members of the PCNC Working Group

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*Painting (page 1) courtesy of Geoffrey Grantham. Photographs courtesy of Geoffrey Grantham, page 2; NS Archives, page 3.*