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HALIFAX'S WEEKLY

COMMENT section UPFRONT ▶

November 27, 2008



by Bruce
Wark
write the
author

Looking for Common sense

The land deal between the city and the province chips another piece off of the Halifax Commons

I call it city council's royal fuck-up. The Queen's High School is being traded to the Queen's Hospital for a new central library on--where else--Queen Street. And we're all worse off. The deal means another chunk of the Halifax Common is about to disappear. It's all part of a land swap between city and province that council approved last week. Believe it or not, the city is giving away 269,000 square feet of prime downtown land in return for 131,000 square feet of prime downtown land and paying nearly two million bucks for the privilege. Under the deal, the province gets the former Birks site on Barrington to build more office space plus the Queen Elizabeth High site at Robie and Bell for expansion of the QE II Infirmary. In return, the city gets the block on Queen between Spring Garden and Morris for a central library, office space, shops and housing.

City officials say the Queen Street land is more valuable than the QEH and Birks properties so that's why the city is paying the province an extra \$1.9 million and getting less than half the land. Even if that's true, there's another issue here that makes this land swap a real royal stinker. Council is violating its own plan for the Halifax Common, the 235 acres of downtown that mad King George III granted to the inhabitants of Halifax forever. Well, not quite forever. City politicians soon started trading huge chunks of it for schools, hospitals, a poorhouse and a cemetery. In 1868, outraged citizens founded a Commons preservation society but, as it turned out, they were pissing in the wind.

By 1994, over half of the Common was occupied by more hospitals and schools, a museum, a church, office towers, stores, condos, apartment buildings, a TV station and big parking lots, oh yeah, lots of big parking lots. Outraged citizens pressured city councillors to promise they would not relinquish any more Common land. The city's 1994 plan also pledged to recapture former Common land "when the buildings or sites are no longer required for their current use." And that's where the now-abandoned Queen Elizabeth High School comes in. Under the terms of the city's plan, the 5.5 acres the school building sits on should revert to open space. Instead, council is selling the land so the province can expand the QE II Infirmary.

City politicians justify this betrayal by claiming there's an urgent need for more hospital space because the older buildings on the VG site are falling apart. It's the same old refrain. Let's trade Common land for hospital rooms. But what about using the Nova Scotia health system more efficiently? A report last year from surgeons at Dalhousie suggested that better use of the Dartmouth General and other provincial hospitals could remove some of the pressure from Halifax hospitals. John Gillis, an emergency room doctor in Dartmouth, agrees. "Just building more buildings does not solve the problem," he says. He adds that better home care, better disease prevention and more access to family doctors would take the pressure off our hospitals. Gillis suggests that if aging buildings on the VG site need to be replaced, a new hospital could be built on the huge VG parking lot on South Park Street. He acknowledges that city councillors are musing about turning that parking lot into green space, but he questions whether that will happen anytime soon. It makes more sense, he adds, to turn the high school site next to the North Common into open space instead of plunking more hospital rooms there.

"I see green space as being part of our health plan," Gillis says. "If we roll in green space and participation, fitness and prevention, we'll need fewer health buildings and it's going to be a whole lot cheaper for us and a lot better for our citizens."

Drop Bruce a line at brucew@thecoast.ca and let him know what you think of trading away Common land.

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
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