



CLOSE WINDOW

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Protecting Halifax's Common ground

By PEGGY CAMERON and BEVERLY MILLER

RECENTLY, the Friends of the Halifax Common were informed HRM will begin electrical repairs to the Centennial Fountain on the North Common. This was conveyed to us as a "good news" story. Indeed, there hasn't been much good news about the Common for a long time.

The Halifax Common, Canada's oldest urban park, was created in 1763 when King George III granted 235 acres "for the use of the inhabitants of the Town of Halifax forever." Originally extending between Cunard and South streets, bounded by Robie on the west and North Park and South Park on the east, only one-third of the Common remains, with the balance occupied by hospitals, CBC-TV, Queen Elizabeth High, Citadel High, Camp Hill Cemetery, Dalhousie University, the Public Gardens, Victoria Park, the Museum of Natural History and All Saints Cathedral.

The 1994 Halifax Common Plan commits HRM to keeping the amount of public open space in the Common, not decreasing the amount of land owned by the city, and seeking to increase the amount of city-owned land through recapture of lands.

Since 1996, Dalhousie University has used the former Grace Hospital site, which is on Halifax Common land, as a 300-car parking lot. Dalhousie is now building the new Life Sciences Research Centre there, but the city has twice refused to take steps to ensure the balance of the land reflects that it is part of the Halifax Common.

Since the mid-'80s, parking lots and garages have rolled across Common land, covering the former Civic Hospital and School for the Blind, and the new Infirmary's front yard. Capital Health acknowledges its failure to value the role of green space in physical, psychological, social and spiritual health, but this hasn't kept it from capturing part of Queen Elizabeth High sited on the Common for the new QEII Emergency – a net gain of six beds.

Although the 1994 Common Plan requires that council not divest itself of Common land, during the present sitting of the Nova Scotia legislature, MLAs will respond to an HRM request to allow the municipality to sell or trade the QEHS property to the province for future use by Capital Health.

The Department of Health says there are no plans for this part of the Common beyond the acquisition. At public meetings, citizens clearly asked that this land be used to meet the open space needs of the increasing number of apartment dwellers in the area, that as a gateway to downtown the land not be built on, and that open spaces and physical activity be recognized as a vital part of health promotion and community well-being.

While the Common plan does not preclude commercial ventures on the Common, HRM has ignored its policy with respect to concerts. The North Common may be used to host concerts of 40,000 or more, but neither the Rolling Stones with about 39,875 attending nor Keith Urban with about 30,000 qualified. Ticket prices (over \$100 for Keith Urban) seem not to fit the requirement that the Common be for the enjoyment of a significant segment of the population.

The alleged financial benefits in return for HRM's \$250,000 contribution to the Stones, \$300,000 to Keith Urban and \$96,973.84 for the turf-protection carpet remain unclear. Certainly these heavily subsidized events made profit for the private sector, but the noise, mess and disruption the North Common experienced in the wake of both concerts was considerable.

More recently, the HRM mayor, council and staff broke regulations for landscape open-space requirements and height regulations for the South Park Street Fares Tower development, permitting the 19-storey structure to be built right up to the sidewalk opposite Victoria Park.

In the 1994 plan, members of the public and city staff emphasized South Park Street was one of Halifax's grand routes and determined that the view between South Street and the Citadel should be landscaped to reflect the historic nature of the area and the beauty of the Public Gardens. Instead, the vision will be of a highrise abutting the concrete sidewalk.

The peninsula is projected to have 15,000 to 20,000 new residents without any planned new green space. Friends of the Halifax Common formed in January 2007 to protect the Common as laid out in the 1994 Plan (www.Halifax.ca/real_property/HalifaxCommonReportArchive.html).

Imagine what a beautiful place the Halifax Common could be with ample open space, recreational opportunities, secluded corners for relaxation, public art and performances. A well-designed and well-tended Common is a key to making urban life an attractive option to people of all walks of life.

Remind HRM government that its role is to protect the Common, not preside over its dissolution and degradation. Write to the mayor and council c/o the Municipal Clerk's office: clerks@Halifax.ca or Box 1749 Halifax B3J 3A5.

Peggy Cameron and Beverly Miller are co-founders and co-chairs of the Friends of the Halifax Common.

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