



"for the use of the inhabitants of the town of Halifax as Common forever" (1763-2023)

September 21, 2023

Ms. Maggie MacDonald,
Executive Director of Parks & Rec for HRM
P. O. Box 1749
Halifax, NS B3J 3A5

Dear Ms. MacDonald:

Re: Wanderers Grounds

This letter is to offer some observations in the hope that they will be of use to you as you prepare a staff report for the Standing Committee on Community Planning and Economic Development with respect to the Wanderers Grounds, particularly in the context of the proposal Mr. Derek Martin made regarding a long-term lease.

1. Public Engagement

We have not yet had the chance to review the video of the meeting, but it seemed that you indicated that public consultations had already been held for the Wanderers Block, as part of the lead-up to the 2018 Master Plan. This is not actually the case. For one thing, public consultations for the entire draft Plan were interrupted by Covid and never completed, even though the Plan went forward. For another, the Plan excludes any specifics for the Wanderers Block, with further public consultations to be undertaken. We have attached our submission to HRM's CPED standing committee on the Master Plan where

we highlighted these and other concerns. We strongly support further, extensive, and effective public consultations taking place.

2. Finances

The essence of the proposal is that HRM bankroll the \$40M in costs to make the changes to the stadium and other infrastructure as proposed by Mr. Martin. This would have to come by way of HRM's capital spending. That is, be financed through the bonds issued by the Municipal Finance Corporation. We have looked at the Corporation's website; it does not list the current rate that would apply to such borrowing, but does show the rate from last year (prior to the increase in interest rates), which is 4.53%. Probably the rate is now greater. This implies that the Wanderers club would have to make monthly payments of rent to HRM of between \$150,000 and \$200,000 every month for the next thirty years if the full cost were to be repaid to HRM.

Note that the calculation we have done regarding cost and rental addresses only the sum being proposed for changes. It does not include basic rental for the site itself, which in any case should be in addition to the costs for upgrades. Further, any lease would have to specify such important matters as control of scheduling and access.

Mr. Martin was clear that he was not prepared to bear the full cost, but to pay some unspecified amount through rent. Any amount in rent that is not the full cost would shift the remainder to taxpayers. This would not be acceptable : (i) because of other, more pressing demands for capital spending; (ii) it would offer a special subsidy to a private business by way of making available the government rate of interest on borrowing; (iii) it would provide a subsidy to a private business if the full amount were not borne by the club; (iv) most of the useful life of the infrastructure would have expired by the end of the lease.

The claim was made, though without any study, that the club's activities generated business in the immediate area. Is HRM able to estimate whether this is accurate, and in doing so will it consider that personal entertainment budgets are spent regardless. Further, is information available regarding food and drink concessions that may be available on-site, both as to how this interacts with possible patronage of nearby businesses and whether alcohol will be a part of the experience on offer?

As the matter of the public funding stadiums is as yet untested in Halifax we recommend the Journal of Economic Surveys' February 2022 article, [The Impact of Professional Sports Franchises and Venues on Local Economies: A Comprehensive Survey](#). This recent analysis of 130 studies on the economic impact of publicly financed sports venue...

“...confirms the decades-old consensus of very limited economic impacts of professional sports teams and stadiums. Even with added non-pecuniary social benefits from quality-of-life externalities and civic pride, welfare improvements from hosting teams tend to fall well short of covering public outlays. Thus, the large subsidies commonly devoted to constructing professional sports venues are not justified as worthwhile public investments.”

(https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4022547)

3. Setting, Design & Turf

The Friends of the Public Gardens sent a letter stating their opposition to the proposal, on the grounds of incompatibility with the Public Gardens. That letter does not seem to have been circulated to the Standing Committee; we attach a copy. The proposal is also not compatible with the Camp Hill Cemetery, where soccer attendees are already parking their vehicles during games. Nor is the proposal compatible with the hospital or the residential apartment buildings in the immediate vicinity, due to noise. An assertion was made that one of the attractions of the site is abundant nearby parking; this is not the case. The parking garage recently built north of the Museum is for use of hospital staff and visitors. Apart from hospital site parking there is no other parking in the immediate vicinity; this means there will be on-street parking during games in neighbourhoods already under parking pressure. A part of the design set out in the proposal is for an entry plaza from Bell Road. It seems likely this would interfere with the Halifax Lancers use of the Block.

The observation was made by Mr. Martin that the Citadel High School sports teams are not able to use the Wanderers Grounds because of the nature of the

grass, as needed for professional sports. It is noteworthy that these uses have been forced off the Grounds by the presence of the professional soccer activity, in conjunction with some measure of inadequate investment by HRM in upkeep prior to 2017. The proposal now seems to be for artificial turf.

We recommend an article on the history of turf in UK soccer fields published in *The Guardian* in 2021: William Ralston, "The Silicon Valley of Turf", *The Guardian*, June 15, 2021, online. This informative survey of UK practices raises questions regarding what exactly is being proposed and its likely cost. Note that there are already two sports fields on the Halifax Peninsula with artificial turf: at Dalhousie and at Saint Mary's University. Both could be available to the Wanderers club.

As a related point, we met with Mr. Martin in 2017/2018 when the first 'pop-up' was under discussion. At the time, he rejected consideration of the SMU site because it had artificial turf and said his team needed a grass field. The current proposal is for the reverse. We ask you to explore this change of view with him.

4. Previous Staff Report

We remind you that in 2017 it was the opinion of HRM staff that the Wanderers Grounds is not a suitable location for a professional soccer club. Any change from that needs to be in terms that specify what if anything has changed since then and what the impact is for the amateur players who used the Field to its full capacity.

A clear implication of the 2017 staff report as well as the decision of HRM Council to allow the use of the Wanderers Grounds on a temporary, experimental basis is that the club has no legitimate claim to use the land on an ongoing basis; it has always known that the use would be for a very limited time. At the standing committee there was some discussion of continuing the temporary arrangement rather than entering into a thirty-year lease. Such an arrangement is not necessary, since the soccer season is about to end, and there is ample opportunity for the club to negotiate with the two universities that have the type of sports field Mr Martin now says is desired.

5. Future Expansion

We ask that consideration be given to the possibility that during any thirty-year lease term, further expansion in size and design may be proposed for the site. If the site is now opened up for general business use, it will be considered for activities such as a CFL team. This possibility was flagged at the Committee, e.g. by Councillor Outhit who wondered if going from a 6,000-person capacity to 8,500 was 'too small'. This possibility implies that quite a different site or sites be kept in mind: perhaps at Shannon Park or Exhibition Park or in Burnside.

Just as the Halifax Peninsula--especially the Wanderers Grounds-- is not a good location for major sports or entertainment events of the sort we have seen in recent years, it would be egregiously poor for a CFL team. Part of what we have in mind in saying this is the Scotia Bank Centre: this is an unfortunate legacy building in a location that generates gridlock traffic at the time of games or shows, and major traffic impediments when the very large transport trucks used for modern shows make their deliveries for set-up and take-down. The Wanderers Grounds should not be allowed to replicate this type of error in long-term planning.

6. The Common as Greenspace

Under the Centre Plan provisions of the MPS, there has been densification of the Halifax Peninsula, while at the same time there has not been any significant expansion of greenspace or other park and recreation facilities. This is especially evident on the Common where there is a history of loss of publicly accessible greenspace and as little as 20% of the 240-acre grant remains open. The need and desire for greenspace should be studied before any further expansion of infrastructure facilities on the Halifax Common is even considered.

7. Health & Environment

We wish to emphasize that a spectator sport venue is not something that is the same as health-promoting physical activity such as tennis, skating, or amateur team sports played by all-comers. The proposal in its essence is for

passive commercial entertainment, not for a facility that is a venue for actual sport save for the few persons on the teams.

As taxpayers, we now pay an additional 3% property tax premium to address climate change. We ask that your report to the Committee explores how concerns over climate change are addressed by building a major sports venue that thousands of spectators will travel to, mostly by private passenger vehicles.

We trust our input and our evidence will support your decision against further privatizing the use of the Wanderers Grounds with a private stadium built with public money.

Finally, we seek the opportunity to meet with you as soon as possible to discuss the points raised here.

Best wishes

BOD Friends of the Halifax Common

Peggy Cameron	William Breckenridge	Janet Stevenson
Beverly Miller	David Garrett	Howard Epstein
Lawrence McEachern	Judith Fingard	Peggy Smith

Attachments:

FHC Submission on HRM Halifax Common Master Plan (Feb 2023)

Friends of Public Gardens letter to HRM CPED (Sept 2023)

CC: Mayor, Council, FHC members, media

