

H.U.G: A Legacy Project

By Leonard Preyra, MLA, Halifax Citadel

Over a decade ago a visionary group of environmentalists, outdoor enthusiasts and political leaders dreamed of a network of trails snaking along the shorelines of the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM). One trail, following footpaths blazed over the last century, would be a leisurely hiking path with branches leading to scenic lookoffs, waterways, and other places of interest and relaxation. The other, running parallel to the nature trail, and sometimes crisscrossing it, would be an active transportation route, designed for motorized wheelchairs, cycling, skateboarding, and other non-motorized modes of transportation and recreation.

In the city of Halifax, the Halifax Urban Greenway (HUG), as it is now named, will be a set of trails around the peninsula that link the Armdale Rotary to the Northwest Arm, Point Pleasant Park, the Halifax Seaport, and the Halifax and Dartmouth waterfronts to landmarks and trails beyond. In addition to being a nature trail for recreational and tourist traffic, HUG's active transportation route will provide a safer option for cyclists commuting to and from the universities on the peninsula (and the community college across the harbour), health care workers, public servants, dockworkers, DND staff and other suburbanites and city dwellers needing alternative transit routes through the urban core.

In April 2007, this dream came closer to becoming a reality when the three levels of government announced that they would each contribute approximately \$300,000 to begin the first phase of HUG. This proposed two-kilometre section will follow the CN rail cut along Beaufort Avenue and Francklyn Street to Point Pleasant Park. At Point Pleasant Park, HUG will connect to a future Young Avenue / South Park on-street bike route to Spring Garden Road and other downtown destinations. (Go to www.halifaxurbangreenway.org for details.)

For many, HUG is a dream coming true. It will go a long way to addressing the recreational and alternative and active transit needs of communities and commuters on the Halifax peninsula. It promises to cut down on vehicular traffic on the peninsula and related health, safety, infrastructure, environmental and other costs.

Nevertheless, there are some critics who, while agreeing with the notion of a nature trail around the peninsula, have reservations about key assumptions driving HUG's "active transportation" path. Some question the assumption that commuting cyclists will use the somewhat circuitous HUG route instead of more direct city streets. Others believe that a paved "all-season" trail will not be used or maintained in winter. Many of the same people object to the

potential loss of vegetation necessitated by the proposed (3.5 m - 4m) width of the “active transportation” trail.

Whether or not the trail will be used in winter by cyclists (or in-line skaters) is a question of faith. Proponents say, “if you build and maintain it they will come” and point to similar and successful projects elsewhere in the country. As to whether the trail has to be paved and 3.5m wide, HRM’s Active Transportation criteria (and funding conditions) require the main path to be an accessible, all-season, interconnected, multi-purpose trail. This means that, for safety and service reasons, it has to be sufficiently wide and smooth to permit safe passage to travelers moving at speed and using various modes of wheeled transport, and be plowable, for wintry conditions (go to www.halifax.ca/TDM/activetransportation/ for details).

In order to preserve significant habitat, vegetation and mature trees on Beaufort Avenue, HRM plans to narrow Beaufort Avenue (between South Street and Oakland Road) and have the path veer away from Beaufort Avenue (between Regina Terrace and Inglis Street) to skirt around a valuable grove of mature trees. Along Beaufort Avenue (between South Street and Marlborough Woods) new trees will be planted along the kerb and adjacent to the path. The HRM and the Halifax Urban Greenway Association are organizing a community walkabout to trace the proposed route of the multi-purpose trail and to respond to questions about vegetation, lighting, fencing, road narrowing, and related challenges.

There are, and will arise, other hurdles to overcome. For example, some adjacent property owners have raised concerns about lighting, fencing, litter and privacy, and there remain technical challenges. While it is essential that these concerns be addressed, the danger in dragging out the consensus-building process (by seeking unanimity) is that further negotiations with key stakeholders will stall, and existing funding and the political will to proceed with the project may disappear. What is significant is that so much has already been accomplished. As mentioned above, the three levels of government have agreed to provide nearly a million dollars to begin phase one of HUG. The major property owners along the HUG route (Saint Mary's University, HRM, Canadian National (CN), the Port Authority and the Waterfront Development) pending lease, ownership and access agreements, have worked with HUG consultants in locating the multi-purpose trail along the edges of their property and there is broad public support in principle for the “rails to trails” initiative and the overall configuration of the active transportation network. The successful launch of phase one of HUG will build on these accomplishments and spur the construction of the rest of the network in the coming decades.

The Halifax Urban Greenway project is more than just a nature trail and an active transportation route. It has the potential to literally and figuratively connect neighbourhoods and diverse communities both on the Halifax peninsula and across the HRM. The trail and the green space surrounding it would not only be a unifying influence within the municipality, it would also be a sizeable addition to our municipal “commons” and a wonderful legacy to pass on to

future generations. As the Premier's recent announcement about turning the rail cut into a truck, train and emergency vehicle corridor suggests, and as the construction of new monster homes along the rail cut indicate, there are other uses for this valuable real estate.

Leonard Preyra is the MLA for Halifax Citadel. Leonard is hoping to submit an article for publication in the next issue of the Southender on the Premier's proposal to build a multi-transportation corridor in the rail cut. He would like to know what you think about these proposals. He can be contacted by email at preyra@eastlink.ca or phone 444-3238.

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