

# Urban density need not be synonymous with height

September 7, 2012 By LARRY HAIVEN



There is evidence that denser does not necessarily mean taller when it comes to urban development. (CP)

In the debate over development on the Halifax peninsula, much has been made of the need for increased population density.

In documents by and about HRM by Design, there are scores of repetitions of the words “dense,” “density,” “densification” and variations thereof. But there is no target for density on the peninsula. And thus, the discourse has been captured by developers. “Don’t want suburban sprawl?” goes the narrative. “We’ll give you density downtown. But the only way to achieve it is to build up.”

Much of that discourse makes the false distinction between single-family homes at one end of the spectrum and tall buildings at the other, with nothing in between. Indeed, height is associated almost axiomatically with densification.

There is a growing opinion among urban planners that density has its limits. There is a “sweet spot,” a point at which density and livability are both maximized while keeping construction costs and other negative externalities of tall buildings in check. That occurs between 12,000 and 13,000 people per square kilometre. Many cities — e.g. London, Paris — have achieved high density on a people-friendly scale.

Now there is evidence that denser does not necessarily mean taller. Right in the heart of Halifax. Friends of Schmidville, a community association representing residents of Halifax’s oldest and largest contiguous historic neighbourhood, has produced an estimate of the density in its six hectares. There are between 15,000 and 23,000 residents per square kilometre.

For some international context, Manhattan has 26,000; Paris, France has 21,000 residents per square kilometre; Dhaka, Bangladesh 19,000 and Barcelona 16,000. For Canadian comparisons, we have HRM, with its suburban sprawl, at only 17 people per square kilometre, downtown

Halifax with a density of about 4,500, urban Toronto at 7,000 and Vancouver’s downtown peninsula at 12,100.

And yet the Schmidville height limit is only 35 feet. In addition to dwellings, there are also shops, an elementary school a senior’s day centre, and many sizable backyards.

Located on about six city blocks south of Spring Garden Road and west of Queen Street, most of Schmidville consists of 19<sup>th</sup> century houses with some dating back as far as the 1700s. The community has applied for Heritage Conservation District designation by HRM in order to preserve this urban delight.

How is such high density achieved with so little height? Schmidville is a mix of rooming houses, apartments and family dwellings (many of them with rental rooms).

While some of the buildings house single families, many of them are subdivided by floor. And in a few cases, there is more than one building on a lot.

Nothing could be farther from the false stereotypes of the south end. The community contains students, renters and owner-occupiers with a wide variety of incomes and ages. While some buildings are of recent vintage, much of the infill sensitively reflects the character of the neighbourhood. In fact, Schmidville fulfils all of the priorities of HRM by Design: density, stability, walkability, mixed usage, appropriate scale, complete streetscapes, infill, and inclusive mobility.

So how dense do we need downtown Halifax to be?

It’s about time we wrestle the discourse from the hands of the self-interested height enthusiasts and show that a mix of older neighbourhoods, medium-rise (maximum six storeys) apartments, and new townhouses can give us the density plus the livability we seek.

*Larry Haiven is a professor in the Sobey School of Business, Saint Mary’s University, and a research associate with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.*