

# CASE STUDY | IMPLEMENTING A PARTICIPATORY CLIMATE ACTION PLAN IN HALIFAX

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## IMPACT SUMMARY

**3%** PROPERTY TAX INCREASE FOR MIN. 10 YEARS TO FUND THE PLAN'S INITIATIVES

**18m** TOWARDS BUILDING A RESERVE TO ENABLE FINANCING & LEVERAGING FUNDS FROM PRIVATE SECTOR

HalifACT's goals are to "to help every community, and every individual in the municipality, take appropriate action to respond to climate change"

## LEADING THE WAY TOWARDS NET ZERO BY 2030

On June 23rd, 2020, the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) approved a climate action plan that quickly became one of the most ambitious in Canada. Better known as HalifACT, the plan is premised on the twin goals of becoming net zero by 2030 and to achieve a net zero economy by 2050. With a booming population of almost half a million residents, Halifax is increasingly affected not only by rapid changes to its urban environment and society, but by a changing climate as well.

To ensure a more resilient and healthy future in Atlantic Canada, Halebogians (Halifax residents) have been working closely with the municipality to design a plan that can deliver equitable solutions while responding to escalating local climate hazards.



HalifACT is premised on the twin goals of becoming net zero by 2030 and to achieve a net zero economy by 2050.



## FUN FACTS

Halifax is closer to Europe than many other North American cities by airplane. It is also closer to New York and Boston than any other major Canadian city.



Community engagement isn't the only feature that distinguishes this plan, though. To meet its goals, in 2022, Halifax's City Council approved a dedicated 3% property tax increase to guarantee funding for the strategic initiatives outlined in its climate plan. The innovative tax ensures that HRM can collect \$18 million annually to perform upfront investments in projects that improve the resilience of communities and infrastructure alike.

While recent, HalifACT has already been met with recognition both inside and outside of Nova Scotia, and the plan is also informing other official municipal policies (including updates to the

Regional Plan). Keep reading to learn more about the key features, innovations, and takeaways of HalifACT.

The Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) is situated in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia and is composed of more than 200 communities and neighbourhoods, including the cities of Bedford, Dartmouth, and Halifax. HRM is home to about 46% of the people who live in Nova Scotia, and to about 85% of those who immigrate to the province. This area is known as Mi'kma'ki and it is where, for more than 12,000 years, the Mi'kmaw people have lived and taken care of the land.

The city of Halifax is in an area known by the Mi'kmaq as K'jipuktuk, meaning Great Harbour. In addition to being the capital of Nova Scotia, Halifax is HRM's most built-up area, the province's most multicultural city, and the largest urban area in Atlantic Canada, with a population of 448,544 people. Fun facts about the place: Halifax is closer to Europe than many other North American cities by airplane. It is also closer to New York and Boston than any other major Canadian city.

## OVERVIEW

The seeds of the HalifACT plan were planted in January 2019, when the municipality declared a [climate emergency](#) at the urging of concerned residents. Eighteen months later, after consultations with the community, HRM approved a climate action plan to reduce emissions and prepare the municipality for the coming impacts of climate change. The municipality's leadership recognizes the power that local governments hold when it comes to acting swiftly on the climate crisis. At the same time, it underscores the significant challenges municipal governments face as the first line of response to climate breakdown and as the level of government closest to residents.

As HalifACT states, "In Canada, the current economic impacts of the climate emergency average \$5 billion per year. By 2050, these impacts are estimated to reach between \$21 and \$43 billion per year. Municipalities across the country own 60 percent of public infrastructure in Canada, therefore, municipalities have a significant role to play in investing in solutions to protect Canadians from current and future climate impacts." The 46 actions outlined in HalifACT have been developed precisely with the understanding that "the economic, social and environmental cost of inaction will continue to grow substantially" if bold measures are not implemented decisively.

Indeed, while HalifACT is a climate action plan that outlines a long-term vision for the next 30 years, the municipality is committed to immediate action, and acknowledges that "**most actions need to be undertaken within the first 10 years**" if its targets are to be met. Remaining in 'business as usual' mode, it estimates, would otherwise mean that the municipality's carbon budget will be exceeded by 2028.

## FOCUS OF THIS CASE STUDY

In this case study, we'll focus on three of HalifACT's most innovative and promising features to highlight how HRM and residents are working towards a shared vision for a more resilient and healthy future for Atlantic Canada:

1. Innovative Climate Financing (particularly, the introduction of a Climate Action Tax);
2. Inclusive Community Engagement (with a spotlight on HRM's blended program of community consultation and awareness-raising);
3. Integrated Vision (how HalifACT is being leveraged to inform other key plans and priorities for HRM).



## INNOVATIVE CLIMATE FINANCING

**“What makes the municipal level special is that, in most Canadian cities, there’s no political party. As councilors, we listen to each other, we listen to what staff have to say, and it means that a really good argument can move a debate—even on a difficult subject like climate change. This is how we’ve had political support for HalifACT to be an implementation plan from the very beginning.”**

*- Sam Austin, Deputy Mayor of Halifax and Councillor District 5 (Dartmouth Center)*

To ensure the success of the HalifACT plan, and to enable swift action from the get-go, in 2022, City Council approved a dedicated 3% property tax increase for a minimum of 10 years to fund the plan’s strategic initiatives. At the time of writing, various HalifACT capital initiatives have already received funding totaling \$20.7 million as part of the 2023/24 budget.

In addition, as of the 2023/24 Budget, the Climate Action Tax is considered a part of the base budget and does not factor into the tax increase required to balance the budget. By collecting \$18 million annually, this tax allows HRM to build a reserve that will enable the financing of upfront investments and the servicing of debt in the years to come. The purpose of the tax is twofold:

- To finance key strategic initiatives such as energy retrofits, electric vehicle procurement, and critical infrastructure projects (including net-zero building development); and
- To leverage climate action funding from the private sector, as well as federal and provincial governments, to provide the necessary investment for the long-term success of HalifACT.

The introduction of the Climate Action Tax was the result of resident mobilization as well as of the leadership of HRM’s Finance Department, which made a convincing case to the public for seeing these strategic priorities as a vital investment in the future wellbeing of the community.

For example, the team was able to explain how building new, net zero and climate resilient municipal buildings will reduce operation and maintenance costs, as well as avoid expensive repairs incurred by flooding or other climate events, ultimately lowering the municipality’s costs of delivering services over time.

Similarly, HalifACT is slated to create employment opportunities and stimulate new and existing business initiatives. In particular, major investments in resilient and decarbonized infrastructure will lead to career opportunities in building construction and retrofit, in the transportation sector, as well as in the renewable energy field. (To date, the municipality itself has added seven new positions to the HalifACT team to move climate action forward and help meet the goals of the plan.)

In keeping with its mandate to leverage funding from additional partners, HalifACT has also spearheaded a number of initiatives designed to stimulate climate problem-solving while simultaneously engaging the wider population on climate action.

For example, in collaboration with the Halifax Innovation Outpost, in 2022 HalifACT placed two open calls for organizations or teams to develop and test solutions to accelerate climate action in Halifax. Fourteen teams were supported with:

- Learning and mentorship in rapid-action prototyping;
- Coaching to help to sharpen and test their ideas with potential customers, users, and/or partners;
- Funding of up to \$5,000 for project costs;
- Participation in a pitch event with an opportunity to showcase ideas and receive feedback and support from advisors in their sector;
- Connection to larger grants to scale up promising solutions.

Similarly, the [Halifax Climate Investment, Innovation and Impact Fund \(HCi3\)](#), a subsidiary of EfficiencyOne, launched its first round of climate funding in February 2022. The fund provides grants to innovative projects that seek to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in the municipality.

To date, HCi3 grant funding, totaling just over \$500,000, was awarded to 11 local projects and provides coverage of up to 80 percent of their costs. Projects include anything from the launch of electric vehicle sharing to deep energy retrofits, passive tiny home construction, workforce development for African Nova Scotian communities, and more.

## INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The HalifACT plan was developed through a collaborative process that engaged municipal staff, members of the municipality's climate action community, technical modelling and analysis experts, as well as the broader public.

On the technical side, the municipality contracted Sustainable Solutions Group (SSG), an environmental consulting company specializing in climate change mitigation and adaptation modelling. Through their work, SSG developed a 2016 baseline GHG inventory, a low-carbon

scenario, an actions catalogue, as well as an adaptation report to inform the foundational targets of the plan.



**“The current HRM team has an interest in helping people connect with the plan and see how it relates to their lives.”**

*-Tara Day, Climate Advocate and Community Organizer*



At the same time, HRM acknowledges and respects that, in order to be meaningful, “targets and actions will require shared implementation across many organizations in the community and by residents.” For this reason, HRM maintains a vibrant network of over 100 groups active in the climate space, be they government and businesses agencies, academic institutions, NGOs or community organizations.

This engagement began in 2019, a time when the HalifACT team held meetings with over 250 internal and external interested parties to

seek input on the design of the climate action plan. The HalifACT project team also conducted more than 35 informal “pop-up” events throughout the municipality during the summer and fall of 2019.

Today, to develop and implement the 46 actions outlined in HalifACT, the municipality continues to work with a wide range of actors, including: all levels of government; utilities; industry; nonprofits and advocacy groups; academic institutions and educators; Mi’kmaq and African Nova Scotian communities; Acadian groups; youth and more.

When it comes to public engagement, the HalifACT team focuses on two key aims:

- Raising awareness on climate change, particularly local climate hazards;
- Collecting input on the kinds of collective action required for successful mitigation, adaptation, and resilience.

To this end, the municipality has developed an ever-evolving communications strategy that includes outreach via social media campaigns, [online consultation tools](#) such as surveys, the development of educational resources, and other local engagement events. Some recent ones include:

- **Celebrate HalifACT**, a youth climate art contest that invited residents of 18 years of age or younger to submit artwork responding to a thematic call along with a short statement describing the personal lessons learned by working on their entry. The themes invited participants to reflect on questions such as “what does a HalifACT hero look like? What if YOU were a HalifACT hero?”, “What does Halifax look like in the future with HalifACT? What will HalifACT change for your community?”, and

“Why is this your favourite action? What does this action look like in action?” The winning entries can be viewed [here](#).

- **Shape Your City Halifax** – a public engagement series, in partnership with Halifax Public Libraries, that was conceived to gain feedback on climate action in the community. As part of the initiative, residents were invited to attend [pop-up engagement sessions](#) hosted by municipal staff at all 16 library locations across the municipality, and to share their thoughts through a [Shape Your City Halifax online idea board](#).
- **Enabling Change: Designing the Path Towards Climate Action** – The Dalhousie Faculty of Architecture and Planning, in collaboration with the Clean Foundation and HalifACT, hosted an engagement series that brought together experts, interested members of the public and practitioners to find new ways forward. Videos from the series can be viewed [here](#).

## INTEGRATED VISION

In designing its climate action plan, the municipality was aware that climate solutions cannot be developed in a vacuum. Taking into account the interrelated and intersectional ramifications of the climate crisis requires an integrative approach that can reconcile socio-ecological needs with those of economies, infrastructures, and governments. Successfully adopting a [‘multisolving’ approach](#) to a systemic crisis such as climate change, while potentially daunting at first, has the potential to generate many co-benefits and wins along the way.

Think, for example, of these beneficial outcomes outlined in HalifACT: “Actions that reduce greenhouse gas emissions can improve air quality, reduce noise pollution, provide space for recreation, physical activity, and social interaction. Adapting to a changing climate therefore also strengthens emergency preparedness and infrastructure resilience, while also enhancing natural habitats and biodiversity.” For this reason, HalifACT is interrelated with numerous other municipal plans and initiatives, some of which include:

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**“A lot of the time people can’t picture the future, or think ahead to a possible future, and a plan like this one helps us build a shared vision to decide what we’d like that future to look like.”**

*– Kathryn Morse, Councillor District 10 (Halifax - Bedford Basin West)*

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INSTITUTE



- The installation of over \$18 million in solar systems through the municipality's [Solar City Program](#);
- The construction of the [Regional Centre All-Ages-and-Abilities Cycling Network](#) through HRM's [Integrated Mobility Plan](#);
- The introduction of new electric busses, Bus Rapid Transit, and ferry routes as part of the [Transforming Transit](#) plan;
- The development of the [Cogswell District Project](#), which will provide green energy through a district energy system that uses heat recovered from the Halifax Wastewater Treatment Plan;
- The protection of nature, enhancing ecosystem functions and increasing green space through the [Green Network Plan](#) and the [Urban Forest Master Plan](#); and,
- The strengthening of the municipality's local food system through the [JustFOOD Action Plan](#) (a partnership between the municipality and the Halifax Food Policy Alliance).

In addition, HRM has joined municipalities across the country to support the inclusion of natural assets in its accounting inventories. Through the Municipal Natural Asset Initiative, the municipality has completed a [preliminary natural asset inventory](#) as a first step on HRM's natural asset management journey.

This is a significant advancement in recognizing natural assets as important components of the definition of "infrastructure", since many ecosystem services either contribute directly to the municipal mandate (e.g., stormwater management, erosion control, air quality) or are strongly influenced by local decision-making (e.g., community wellbeing metrics and climate regulation). Formally incorporating natural assets such as flood protection and biodiversity benefits in climate action plans means that they can be more meaningfully considered by decision-makers moving forward.

## RECOGNITION FOR CLIMATE LEADERSHIP

Despite its short history, the HalifACT plan has been enjoying a wave of recognition and support from both within Nova Scotia and elsewhere. Here are some of its latest achievements:

- In 2023, Halifax ranked 11th among 70 cities in [Corporate Knights' Sustainable Cities Index](#), which measures and evaluates environmental sustainability performance in 70 cities around the globe;
- Still in 2023, HalifACT received several national awards during the Clean50 Summit. Shannon Miedema, Director of Environment & Climate Change at HRM, was named one of the 2023 Clean16 for her stewardship, and HRM was also awarded Canada's Clean50 in the [Top Project](#) category.
- In 2022, HalifACT was recognized as one of 122 cities on [CDP's Cities A List](#). CDP is a global, nonprofit charity that runs the world's disclosure system for investors, companies, cities, states and regions to assess their environmental impact and drive the urgent action needed to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, safeguard water resources and protect forests. "A" is the highest possible score on its list;



- HalifACT also received a Climate Change Leaders Award for its municipal Electric Vehicle Strategy at the 2022 [Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities](#) conference;
- HRM has equally accepted three badges from the [Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy \(GCoM\)](#) in the Compliance, Adaptation and Mitigation categories;
- Lastly, in November 2022, Mayor Savage and HalifACT staff, Shannon Miedema and Sera Thompson, attended the 27th Annual Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP27) in Egypt. Municipal staff participated as part of the official Canadian Delegation with a focus on sharing Halifax’s leading climate work and promoting the importance of municipal government in climate action while connecting with and learning from others from around the globe.

## KEY IMPACTS

At the time of writing, work on 30 of 46 HalifACT actions has begun, however, as noted on the plan’s website, only 5 have been reported to be on track and adequately resourced so far. Despite the plan’s ambitious and innovative features, in fact, some work remains to be done to adequately meet staffing, funding, and implementation needs in the years to come. As the website acknowledges, “at the current pace, the municipality’s carbon budget, which is modelled to align with maintaining global average temperature rise below 1.5 degrees Celsius, will be exceeded by 2028.”

At the same time, findings in the [progress report](#) presented to the Regional Council on November 22, 2022 highlight some early successes in the areas of mitigation and adaptation. They include, among others:

### Mitigation:

- \$175,000 grant to support retrofit program received from the [Federation of Canadian Municipalities](#);
- New municipal guidance such as the EV strategy, Deep Energy Retrofit pilot, and administrative order mandating net zero corporate builds;
- \$18 million in solar energy systems installed through [Solar City](#);
- Completion of one third of [Regional Centre All Ages and Abilities Bike Network](#).

### ADAPTATION

- The investment of \$275,000 worth of trees to support HRM’s Urban Forest Master Plan;
- Application of Natural Infrastructure Funding to improve Eastern Passage’s Shore Road (a \$5 million project);
- Emergency backup generators installed at four community locations to provide emergency comfort centres during extreme weather events.

## CONCLUSION

The [HalifACT](#) plan positions the municipality as a leader in climate action. With a strong focus on collaborative engagement and the support of community-based efforts, the plan’s goals are “to help every community, and every individual in the municipality, take appropriate action to respond to climate change” whether that’s by preventing loss, cutting emissions, saving financial resources, or strengthening communities.

With an estimated cost of \$22 billion, HRM acknowledges that significant public and private investments will be required to reduce the municipality’s GHG emissions and achieve net zero targets in its proposed 30 years. Its innovative Climate Action Tax is designed to jumpstart and safeguard these investments, with a projected benefit of approximately \$21.9 billion in saved energy costs, operations, maintenance, carbon pricing, and increased revenues from energy generation.

As HalifACT states, “avoided costs of preparing for climate hazards cannot be underestimated – research shows that every \$1 invested in climate change adaptation saves \$6 in future climate impact costs.” Remarkably, the municipality anticipates that these savings will begin to offset investments by 2030, twenty years ahead of the plan’s end point of 2050.

Along the way, HRM plans to continue engaging residents and communities through comprehensive and integrative outreach and programming. Learn more — and get involved! — by following the resources below:

- [HalifACT 2050](#) (Plan)
- [HalifACT 2050](#) (Council Package)
- [Technical Report](#)
- [Baseline and BAU Report](#)
- [Adaptation Baseline Report](#)
- [Community Engagement Report](#)
- [Stakeholder Commitment Letters](#)
- [Halifax March 2023 Community Update](#)
- [Halifax at COP27 Video](#)

At the Tamarack Institute, we believe we can all be part of solving problems and building capacity to take action. To learn more about how collective impact for climate action is supporting the work of communities across the country, discover Tamarack’s [Community Climate Transitions](#) program.



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Funded by the Government of Canada's Sustainable Development Goals Funding Program.

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