
Government Relations Strategy Summary – HRM Regional Planning Involvement

Background:

In 2004, the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Nova Scotia made physical activity a strategic priority. This direction proved fortuitous: Halifax Regional Municipality was in the process of preparing a 25-year Regional Plan. Recognizing the problem and the opportunity, we designed a government relations strategy to demonstrate how HRM's regional plan could effectively address physical activity.

The primary audience for this initiative, the cornerstone of which was a comprehensive report that explored the cost of physical inactivity and how effective planning could reduce this cost, was HRM council, planning staff and transportation staff. Secondary audiences included media, political representatives and staff at the provincial level, provincial government officials, volunteers, stakeholders, and the general public.

Approach:

Building on their initial contact with HRM council and planning staff in the winter of 2003, the Policy and Government Relations Department staff strengthened its relationship with HRM planning officials throughout the spring of 2004. This included more regular, and informal, meetings and sharing information and research on the connection between health and planning. As the same time, the Policy and Government Relations Department staff contacted HRM's mayor and councillors as they debated the 18-month interim growth-management moratorium. The urban sprawl issue formed the basis for our government relations strategy and our research.

Our contact with HRM officials in raising health promotion as a key aspect within the regional plan was recognized in May 2004 when HRM planning staff asked Clare O'Connor, Director, Policy and Government Relations, to sit as a panel member at the official public launch of HRM's Regional Planning Alternatives, a panel put together to explore the growth alternatives. While some panel members urged HRM planning staff to select the most cost-effective planning alternative, Clare O'Connor urged staff to consider costs in a more comprehensive manner and include "other" important economic costs: health care, economic development, and productivity, among others.

In June, realizing that there was a significant gap in meaningful and local cost-benefit research needed by HRM council, the Policy and Government Relations Department commissioned GPLAtlantic to examine the costs of physical inactivity in HRM. The final report, *The Cost of Physical Inactivity in Halifax Regional Municipality*, demonstrated for the first time in HRM how the costs of physical inactivity were directly linked to the way we build the community. And from an economic perspective, it demonstrated the vital economic implications that regional growth can have on a community.

Volunteer Involvement:

We knew our volunteers would meaningfully raise the planning/health promotion connection directly with their elected official. Therefore, volunteers were invited to the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Nova Scotia's offices for a presentation on the report. At the end of the presentation, all volunteers received a package of information that included background health and economic literature, news articles and HRM information.

To get the broadest reach, we asked volunteers to share the information with other stakeholders. We also asked our volunteers to contact Mayor Peter Kelly, their respective HRM councillor, and HRM planning staff to let them know that they supported HRM's direction for the regional plan, particularly the call for more bike paths, walking trails and green spaces. This request was timely as 2004 was a municipal election year.

The Policy and Government Relations Department also prepared a short questionnaire for all mayoral and municipal candidates. The questionnaires were synthesized and sent to all stakeholders prior to the October municipal elections. The support of our volunteers in writing letters and e-mail was essential to the

government relations process, and their participation in the process made a significant difference in making councillors and candidates aware of the importance of health within HRM and within HRM's regional plan.

Finally, while the report itself made the case for the need for physical activity in HRM, from mid-October forward, the Policy and Government Relations Department staff conducted additional research and analysis to move the report from the municipal government to the provincial government.

Ongoing Stakeholder Discussions / Presentations:

In addition to engaging volunteers, the Policy and Government Relations Department staff recognized the importance of engaging key stakeholder groups with presentations summarizing *The Cost of Physical Inactivity in HRM* report and outlining the report's implications for the 25 year regional plan. Stakeholder presentations included, but were not limited to, the Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre staff, Clean Nova Scotia and government departments. Additionally, information sessions and presentations were held in various regions throughout Nova Scotia with the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Nova Scotia's Health Promotion Coordinators.

Communications:

Throughout the summer, donalee Moulton from Quantum Communications assisted the Policy and Government Relations Department with developing a communications plan to support release of the report. A plan that emphasized broad media coverage while capitalizing on key opportunities to reach target audiences was developed. Since the release of the report in mid-September, there has been a story, column or editorial appearing frequently in local, provincial and national publications. As stories ran in the media, they were forwarded to volunteers to highlight media interest in the report and to build the momentum and involvement up for health promotion and physical activity opportunities in HRM's regional plan.

Results:

Most significantly, in December 2004, the Regional Planning Committee recommended to HRM council that as the foundation for the 25-year regional plan it move forward with Alternative B, as we had proposed. HRM Council endorsed the proposed Regional Plan for public consultations. It is worth noting that although Alternative B is not the least costly of the three proposed alternatives, it was the alternative that most emphasized potential physical activity opportunities for residents.

Another important milestone included the Policy and Government Relations Department being asked to sit as a member on the Regional Planning Implementation Working Group, which is tasked with providing advice and policy recommendations to the HRM Regional Planning Committee on how to implement the regional plan. The Heart and Stroke Foundation of Nova Scotia is the only health organization on the panel.

There has also been considerable recognition at the provincial level. From mid-September forward, the Policy and Government Relations Department staff conducted additional research to dovetail with provincial government initiatives. For example, the Seniors Citizens' Secretariat staff members were receptive to our report and agreed with our policy suggestions to ensure physical activity opportunities for seniors within all Nova Scotia communities as part of the provincial government's strategy for "positive aging". As well, the Nova Scotia government's Office of Health Promotion has created a link to the report with its Web site, which will reach an even broader audience. Currently, senior policy staff in the Office of Health Promotion are analyzing the report for use throughout Nova Scotia.

Accomplishments:

The government relations strategy for making health an important component in regional planning took less than one year. With our government relations approach, our cost of inactivity research, and our volunteers, individuals, groups and organizations within HRM have become increasingly aware of the connection between health and planning. This awareness has also resulted in increased contact between the public and the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Nova Scotia for more information regarding health promotion and regional planning.