

## EDITORIAL

### **On making the right decisions in urban planning and coastal management – a role for the NSIS?**

There can often be a disconnect between important societal needs and the actions and attitudes of elected politicians, policy makers, and the responsible bureaucracies. We hope that this editorial, and you the reader, will stimulate a discussion within the NSIS about how, on important issues, information (social and scientific) can best be considered and be influential at various policy and decision-making interfaces. This is a topic of much interest today on many fronts (for example, see Dalhousie University EIUI project [www.eiui.ca](http://www.eiui.ca) and Macdonald *et al.* 2016). Two local high-profile issues are of current concern to us and are briefly discussed below. The reader will likely think of others!

The first issue is the current rush by the Halifax City Council to densify the city core, including new major housing developments in places such as the Young Street District near the Halifax Forum (D’Silva 2024, Hurley 2024, Ryan 2024) and further afield at Exhibition Park, along with smaller developments in the city’s south end. Densification proposals seem to be moving forward with little or no regard for the effects on the overall city landscape, the preservation of historically important buildings, local neighbourhoods, the need for more urban green space, and the city’s overall appearance and attractiveness for both citizens and visiting tourists. Tourism includes tens of thousands of people coming each year on cruise ships and is of key importance to the local economy. As well, the ability for everyone to move around, on and off the Halifax peninsula, can be impeded by poorly located developments.

The current intensification to alleviate the housing crisis is being driven more by the availability of federal and provincial funds than by the results of thoughtful planning. The rush for the 77 million dollars from the federal government, the so-called Housing Accelerator funding, and dictates from the province for special development areas, have overridden planning initiatives over the last five years that have included some densification along bus transit corridors and been part of “the plan”. Unfortunately, while young people are

not opposed to densification, this development boom has a cynical element in that it is not creating housing that anyone below having a six figure income can afford!

Improved passenger rail and ferry transportation (talked about for decades), would make it possible to spread new developments more evenly around the harbour, alleviating pressures on the city core and its main transportation routes. That would require genuine long-term planning and extended financial support. The studies required need input from scientists, including geologists and engineers, both local and from other cities such as Dublin, Ireland, where light commuter rail/trolleys have been successfully installed in the last thirty years (Anon. 2024). Halifax city planners appear to be too slow and uncommitted to initiate a truly enlightened housing development plan along with improved transit. Halifax used to be called “the smart city”! It is way past time to revisit and re-earn this epithet!

The second big issue to consider, one perhaps more directly related to NSIS’s science mandate, is the current Conservative government’s recent refusal to enact, i.e. proclaim, the provincial Coastal Protection Act. This decision was made after years of citizen discussions and passage of the Act with all party support in 2019 (CBC 2024, Hurley 2024, Wells 2024). The Act would have solved an obvious urgent need in Nova Scotia for coordinated coastal management in an era of climate change that brings increased sea level rise, more coastal erosion, and severe storms. There needs to be knowledgeable information available with respect to the locations of coastal infrastructure (e.g. people’s homes) and avoidance of ineffective and highly damaging coastal hardening and infilling in areas prone to erosion. Downloading the responsibility of protecting the coasts and shorelines to the counties and municipalities will not work for many practical reasons, e.g. lack of resources and trained personnel for land-use planning and developing new regulations. The Act’s cancellation and replacement with local action plans (typical bureaucratic stalling behaviour) is a major embarrassment for a province called “Canada’s ocean playground”. A more appropriate label might now be “Canada’s mismanaged coast”! It is not too late for the government to change its mind and reverse the decision – the comprehensive Coastal Protection Act is needed now, without delay!

Both of these issues point to the interplay of politics, the potential for conflicts of interest, and the need for serious land use planning in

both urban and rural coastal areas of the province. Halifax's planned growth requires informed management, and wise and honest decisions. Coastal protection requires in-depth basic knowledge of climate change, ocean processes, and the applied science of coastal planning (including marine spatial planning and marine protection areas) for making coordinated and informed coastal policies and decisions. We as a society seem to be failing on both fronts. How did a smart city and province end up in this quandary? Is the system of governing simply inept or broken, or have local councillors and politicians been overtaken by self-interest, with little concern for the future? Where, when and how do we find and elect honest and unbiased decision makers?

In our view, the problem does not lie in the academic fields of urban development and coastal management. The basic principles in both fields are well established and expert advice is readily available. The problem is the lack of elected officials looking to the future with open eyes. Simply put, we cannot afford to be in this situation if we want our city and our coastlines to be habitable and safe.

Our Institute, the NSIS, surely has a role to navigate us towards an informed future for our city and our coasts. One solution may be to give serious attention to becoming "Honest Advocates" on such issues, defined as "contributing to decision-making in a purposeful, well-informed manner, doing social good without damaging the reputation of science" (Gregory *et al.* 2024). In our view, the city and province deserve nothing less.

We welcome your views and suggestions for the next steps to take as individuals and as an Institute. These and many other challenges (see previous recent PNSIS editorials) must be addressed as we are now well into the twenty-first century and are living in uncertain political, economic and environmental times. Sitting on the sidelines is not an option. Science has an important role in the public forum.

The breadth of the contributions to this Issue of the PNSIS is especially noteworthy and a sign of the variety of science conducted in our region. Two of the Commentaries deserve special mention, those penned by Don Gordon and Charles Schafer, both of whom sadly passed away while preparing their articles, a testament to their dedication to their science - oceanography. We dedicate this issue to them; they are an inspiration to us all.

The papers by Roger Marsters and Don Gordon are on ocean research carried out from two famous ships with a connection to Halifax, the HMS *Challenger*, visiting the port from England in 1873, and the CSS/CCGS *Hudson* that conducted marine research for Canada from 1963-2022. An account of the Challenger's visit was published that year in our Proceedings (W. Gossip, "The Challenger Scientific Expedition Visit to Halifax," *Transactions of the Nova Scotian Institute of Science* 3 (1873), 335-337). This underlines the value and importance of the Proceedings now being available on-line and searchable. The account of the Hudson's work reflects Don Gordon's unique knowledge of that ships' many cruises and its accomplishments. One hopes that in 100 years time, people will be able to retrieve accounts of the work of both ships and wonder about the technical advancements so important to our understanding of the ocean.

We thank all three authors, Marsters, Gordon and Schafer, for their most interesting and informed Commentaries.

*Acknowledgements* We thank Patricia Manuel and Andrew Horn for their reviews of this article during preparation. Again, we dedicate this PNSIS Issue to two of our authors, Drs. Donald C. Gordon and Charles T. Schafer, both outstanding ocean scientists who sadly passed away recently while their papers were in press; their dedication to science while retired is an example and inspiration to us all.

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