

Why it makes sense for the Province & HRM to remove Sandy Lake from the Special Planning Areas list

The Sandy Lake - Sackville River area is a very complex area that needs a slower process and additional studies to be fully understood. The Sandy Lake Special Planning Area, located mostly on the west side of Sandy Lake, but also south in key areas that are of ecological significance, should be removed from the list of areas fast-tracked for housing development (the Special Planning Areas list) for the following reasons.

1 SPECIES AT RISK AND RARE ECOSYSTEMS

Within the Sandy Lake – Sackville River area are documented observations of 16 Species at Risk (federal and provincial lists). The area hosts an astounding 11 habitat types, along with multiple old growth Acadian Forest stands, part of the few still remaining in the province. There are legal consequences for killing Species at Risk or destroying their critical habitat. The Province and HRM should not squander the opportunity to help rare species and rare forests to survive.

2 PROTECTED AREA OPPORTUNITY

Marsh Lake sits between Sandy Lake and the Sackville River. It is flanked by properties that are a part of Sandy Lake Regional Park, yet the provincially-owned parcel around the lake is not protected. Protecting the lands around Marsh Lake provides a special opportunity, in a near-urban setting, to add a significant area to the Province’s goal of 20% protected land by 2030. The marshy lands around the lake host a plethora of birds, bugs, plants and more, recorded during a citizen science “bioblitz” of the area. In 2021, Marsh Lake was designated a Nova Scotia Treasured Wetland by Ducks Unlimited and the Nova Scotia Departments of Resources and Renewables and Environment and Climate Change. Further development at Sandy Lake will diminish the area’s ecological assets, affecting Marsh Lake and the Sackville River, which are downstream from Sandy Lake.

3 WILDLIFE CORRIDORS

The Sandy Lake Special Planning Area contains both smaller wildlife corridors and larger, landscape-level links between the mainland Nova Scotia and the Chebucto Peninsula. All of these vital wildlife corridors are identified in HRM’s Halifax Green Network Plan (HGPN), and the corridors are further clarified in biologists’ ground-level studies as well as in the Nova Scotia

Crown Share and Legacy Trust Wildlife Corridor Charette Report. Dr. Karen Beazley's (professor emeritus of Dalhousie University) wildlife corridor research also supports the widening of waterway and wetland buffers because they function as wildlife corridors in Sandy Lake area, and they play a significant role in biodiversity protection for Blue Mountain - Birch Cove Lakes area as well.

The new HRM draft Regional Plan shows, as already indicated by multiple studies and experts, that an essential wildlife corridor runs right through the Sandy Lake Special Planning Area. The name "essential" is not used lightly. Development in the Special Planning Area risks cutting off wildlife movement at a critical juncture, exacerbating negative impacts on wildlife populations during the current biodiversity crisis.

4 OLD GROWTH FOREST

Halifax's topography makes a switch from rocky to rich, sandy, drumlins at Sandy Lake. They are what support the magnificent mixed species, multi-aged Acadian Forest surrounding the lake. Within Sandy Lake Regional Park and in the surrounding lands are significant old-growth stands, many trees over 200 years old. Less than 1% of Nova Scotia's forests are currently at an old growth stage, making them a very rare and important conservation feature. There are animal and plant species can only live in old forests – these species are still found in the Sandy Lake area. Preservation of old growth forests stands at Sandy Lake, including the old growth in the Sandy Lake Special Planning Area, is an exceptional opportunity to protect and learn from this rare landscape feature.

5 CONSERVATION VALUE

Multiple studies have shown characteristics worth conserving instead of demolishing on the west and south sides of Sandy Lake (location of Special Planning Area). One of the latest studies about the area, "Sandy Lake Ecological Features Assessment" (McCallum Environmental Limited), maps and describes areas of high conservation significance on the west side of the lake. HRM Councillors took this report seriously, and recommended exceptional care be taken to protect waterways and wetlands in the area *if* the area were to be developed. So far, it seems that the Special Planning Area will not incorporate these directions from HRM Council that are needed to protect the environment.

The Sackville River has been a locale for extensive Atlantic Salmon habitat restoration work over three decades. This nationally-modeled and award-winning work has been successful in bringing this endangered species back to the river, all the way up to Sandy Lake. Atlantic Salmon, Gaspereau and American Eels have returned to Sandy Lake. What would damage this encouraging restoration work would be for development to proceed in the Sandy Lake Special Planning Area, part of the headwaters of the Sackville River. Increases in salt, nitrogen, and phosphorus, into the lake, which accompanies development, is exactly what is *not* needed to

help bring back salmon. Millions of dollars in government investment and volunteer efforts spent over 35 years to return salmon to the area will be for nothing if development proceeds in the headwaters of the Sackville River around Sandy Lake.

6 HISTORY

Sandy Lake Regional Park and all of the lands around it were previously zoned as park to protect this functioning ecological unit. Citizens were excited about this park. In the 1970's a local family offered 550 acres to the west of Sandy Lake to the Municipality for free to become part of the park (the gift was turned down because the county warden was growing the local industrial park. There was an incompatible plan to have the lake used for dumping effluent. Local citizens, a biologist, and the industry had treatment ponds installed instead.) Ten years later, the land was offered again, but by then developers were aware that the land was available for development. The Town of Bedford councillors voted by a narrow margin to turn down the second land offer in September 1982, and they rezoned about half of the Sandy Lake area for future housing.

Housing in the Sandy Lake area was considered and rejected in 1986. The Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) completed the Jack Lake Land Evaluation, in order to consider building housing near Jack Lake, which is east of Sandy Lake. Instead of proceeding with that proposed housing project, CMHC gave about 1,000 acres east of Sandy Lake to the Province, which in turn, gave the lands to the city for Jack Lake/Sandy Lake Park. The development did not happen partly because of the need for at least one highway interchange into the development, but also because of the stringent and detailed mitigations this report advised were required in order to prevent environmental damage to Jack, Sandy, and Marsh lakes, through to the Sackville River. This is a strong precedent that could fortify a decision not to allow housing to proceed in the lands south and west of Sandy Lake, where the headwaters are.

7 COMMUNITY

Large volunteer contributions by citizens, and at least six consecutive community groups, have gone to this park over five decades, plus investments by all levels of government. All of these investments are now at risk if the development goes ahead.

For years there has been a campaign to expand Sandy Lake Regional Park by 1,800 acres to recover the broader area of important features (including on the west and south sides of Sandy Lake), first mapped and described in a 1971 park strategy for Halifax. This 1971 project was a joint exercise by municipal, provincial and federal partners. The long-standing vision for the larger, fully-functioning ecosystem of Sandy Lake Regional Park has not yet been fulfilled.

The Sandy Lake – Sackville River Regional Park Coalition is comprised of 30 community and environmental groups all calling for protection of the area instead of development. These local, provincial, and national groups all understand the science about the area, and that expansion of

the park better supports policy directions, government commitments, and community interests. These groups are ready to significantly pushback if the proposal to develop in the area continues.

8 RECREATION

Lions Club Beach at Sandy Lake Regional Park does not yet suffer from closures of the swimming area from blue-green algal blooms the way other HRM beaches often experience. However, blooms of non-blue-green algae occurred in 2019 and the beach was closed in July 2023 due to high bacteria counts. These are new occurrences and are warning signs. The science supports the evidence that Sandy Lake should be protected against further increases in nitrogen, phosphorus, and salt input in order to reduce the onset and frequency of algae blooms and of harmful bacteria outbreaks. We need to improve lake water quality, not make it worse. Sandy Lake is also a drinking water source for local residents. Water quality could be threatened by a larger, nearby housing development as is proposed in the Sandy Lake Special Planning Area.

9 EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

A variety of significant natural elements exist all in one place at Sandy Lake Regional Park and beyond its current boundaries. The 3 lakes in the area are examples of diverse yet related ecologies - one a big marsh, one a deep, blue lake, and the third a Boreal forest lake. The variety of lake and other habitats all in one place are particularly valuable for education and research. With so many schools nearby, this park is already an ideal area being used for increased exposure to nature. There are dozens of research papers and reports completed about the area from the 1950s to 2022 by schools, universities, independent researchers, governments, and community.

Scientific studies, including the Halifax Green Network Plan, Wildlife Corridors Charrette, Natural Wonders study, and the McCallum study, show Sandy Lake's ecological values more than rival its development values, but these values are at extreme risk should development proceed in the watershed.

10 FLOODING

The potential for serious flooding of the Sackville River was clearly demonstrated in Lower Sackville and Bedford in the floods of 2023. Floodplain mapping has been partially created in the Sackville River Floodplain study of 2017, but the mapping left out the Sandy Lake sub-watershed of the river. It is very important to know what will happen if development goes ahead in the Sandy Lake Special Planning Area. Housing development increases stormwater runoff in an area, increasing flooding downstream. Housing development is also accompanied by the destruction and degradation of streams and wetlands which have been holding back flood waters. Development at Sandy Lake can be expected to worsen flooding risk downstream in the Sackville River. This is reason enough to remove Sandy Lake from the Special Planning Area list.

11 BENEFITS TO THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT

Removing Sandy Lake area from the Special Planning Area list can be a positive thing for the provincial government. Governments do not normally like being seen as changing directions once a decision appears to have been made. However, it will look very good if the Province does remove Sandy Lake from the Special Planning Areas list. The public would applaud evidence that the government gives real consideration to competing values in order to make the best decision. This would demonstrate that the Province is not advancing “development at all costs,” as it seems to be doing now.

There are other places in HRM where housing development can be accelerated with substantially less environmental and community impact. When the Task Force on Housing was first created, HRM brought forward 23 sites in HRM for potential selection as Special Planning Areas. Nine of these were selected, including Sandy Lake. However, some of the selected sites, and some of those not selected, are ready-to-go opportunities to redevelop properties, such as mall parking lots. Redevelopment of these sites will destroy less valuable wilderness, and will repurpose already disturbed sites. Redevelopment sites are often close to amenities and transit, and are already connected to city services. Choosing these sites instead of “greenfield” sites like Sandy Lake is better city planning, and better helps with keeping nature intact for all that it does to combat the climate and biodiversity crises.

Historic ways of looking at undeveloped land assume that it is “not doing anything useful” until it is developed. New research, especially in the face of climate change, is determining ecosystem values of wild land. Wild land performs a multitude of ecosystems services, such as holding back flood waters, trapping carbon, and cleaning the air. For example, a 2017 report from TD Bank Group and Nature Conservancy of Canada determined the value of ecosystem services of the Long Tusk Lake lands (wild lands in Nova Scotia) at a minimum of \$26,250 per hectare annually. This is the value of services delivered by the wild land, for free, when left intact.

We know the Premier wants to take action to address the housing crisis, as do we all, but we expect he also wants to be seen as a wise leader who weighs the relative values for the good of the citizens and future of the province. What will make the Premier and his team look bad would be protests on a site that should not be on the list. Groups are ready to significantly pushback if the idea of housing keeps being advanced for Sandy Lake. Let’s instead choose to celebrate the preservation of this area together. Better to protect it and enjoy the praise.

This summary report provides a wealth of reasons for preserving the Sandy Lake area by removing it from the Special Planning Areas list. We ask the Province to commit to making those lands and waters available instead to the adjacent Sandy Lake Regional Park. Sandy Lake is more important than ever to preserve, and the thousands of Nova Scotians calling for the area’s preservation understand the reasons why. There is huge value in working together to ensure that the rare and valuable natural features at Sandy Lake - Sackville River are conserved instead of destroyed.