



Why is housing affordability an environmental issue?

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A couple weeks ago, I spoke to [CBC's Pam Berman](#) about the latest draft of the [Centre Plan](#) and expressed that my primary concern with the Plan, which is intended to direct growth in the Regional Centre for the next 15 years, is the somewhat ambiguous directions on affordable housing. The city is limited in what they can do about housing by the Charter, but it's still important to talk about who we're planning for when we make plans to service upwards of 90,000 people. This discussion includes both market and non-market housing, and encompasses the creation of new housing (which the city has committed to [elsewhere](#)) but also the retention of existing affordable housing.

Since the interview, I've answered one question a number of times: "why is someone from the Ecology Action Centre commenting on affordable housing? What does that have to do with the environment?" I wanted to try to simplify the connection, since I agree – it's not immediately obvious.

Firstly, what is affordable housing? The Centre Plan defines it as housing that costs up to but not over 30% of the household gross monthly income. Obviously, what is affordable is different for families and individuals with different incomes. The reason this is becoming somewhat of a hot-button issue is that in Halifax right now, we're seeing a [four-decade high](#) in income inequality. This means that the households that, in the past, had difficulty covering the cost of their rent or mortgage are having more difficulty; those who might not have had difficulty buying or renting before are finding it increasingly difficult; meanwhile living in the Regional Centre is increasingly becoming exclusive to households grossing relatively high monthly incomes.





The result is that those who want to live in the Regional Centre – whether because it’s close to family, close to amenities, close to work, has adequate public transport, or any other reason – either can’t afford to settle there or are getting pushed out by increasing housing costs in their neighbourhood. You may know this process as “gentrification”.

Meanwhile, the so-called “commuter-shed” of HRM has seen substantial growth in the past several decades – the urban/suburban area land coverage increased by 92% between 1992 and 2014, while the population itself only increased by 19% in the same time period. This means that instead of building compact, accessible, complete communities that offer amenities close to home, we’ve primarily been building urban sprawl, which costs more than 3x the amount to service than compact development does. This means that the taxpayer, no matter where they live, pays more for basic services to accommodate servicing more and more suburban communities. Growth is good because it can help to improve public amenities, but it can’t do this if it costs more than it earns.

So, why is this an environmental issue? The answer is simple: If more people are unable to afford housing in the Regional Centre, then more people get pushed out into the suburban areas. There are many environmental issues with urban sprawl style development, but I’ve boiled it down to two simple issues to keep the information succinct.

Issue 1

The first issue is that frequently when we’re building sprawl, we’re paving over and degrading the ecosystems of formerly natural landscapes that offer animal habitat, watershed protection, carbon sequestration, and not to mention some of our incredible tourism vistas.

Issue 2

Secondly, when it comes to getting the residents of these neighbourhoods to their jobs, to the store, to the park, etc., oftentimes the only feasible option is to drive a car. This means that the carbon footprint in these communities is much higher than the carbon footprint in the urban core or even in complete communities, where people can use other modes of transportation to get around.

Therein lies the environmental issue. If fewer people can afford to live in the Regional Centre, that means more people get pushed out to the suburbs where they’re forced to own vehicles or otherwise to rely on much less frequent and reliable public transit to get around. It’s simple: everyone should have the opportunity to live in a complete community, not only those who can afford it. Living close to work, school, groceries, and recreation should not be a luxury.

And sadly, this doesn’t even fully describe the associated environmental justice issues that take place when gentrification occurs. Stay tuned for that in the next post.