INFORMED PARTICIPATION: A METHOD FOR ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY IN PLANNING FOR THE HALIFAX REGIONAL MUNICIPALITY

by

Heather Ternoway

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The undersigned hereby certify that they have read and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance a thesis entitled “Informed Participation: A Method for Engaging the Community in Planning for the Halifax Regional Municipality” by Heather Ternoway in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Urban and Rural Planning.

Dated __________________________

______________________________
Frank Palermo, Supervisor

______________________________
Kurt Pyle, Advisor
DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY

AUTHOR: Heather Ternoway
DEPARTMENT: School of Planning
DEGREE: Master of Urban and Rural Planning
CONVOCATION: May, 2003

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Dedicated to those who encourage my idealism...

Unless someone like you cares a whole lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not.

~ Dr. Seuss: The Lorax ~
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The primary objective of this research is to consider the potential of increasing awareness of planning issues in the Halifax Regional Municipality. In order to guide the development of a proposal to achieve the objective of informed participation, several methods were employed. An extensive review of the literature yielded principles and criteria for effective participation and information exchange. Local information needs and sources were discerned by means of an information needs assessment questionnaire. Case studies provided international inspiration from successful examples of planning centres.

Findings of this research indicate that in order to increase meaningful involvement in planning processes, diverse techniques must be used to foster communication and mutual understanding. Accessible, objective information is a key element in overcoming barriers to participation, such as power structures, skepticism and a lack of understanding. Employing communicative approaches facilitates mutual understanding of information and issues.

A Planning Centre is proposed as the solution which best meets the criteria and objectives developed through this research. This facility will provide information and interpretation, in order to engage a broader spectrum of participation in planning for the future of communities.
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CHAPTER ONE
Introduction

1.1 Need for information and participation in the planning process

“Knowledge is derived from experience and validated in practice, and therefore it is integrally a part of actions” (Friedmann 1981: 81).

The interdisciplinary nature of planning necessitates collaboration from many departments and agencies involved in the administration and research of planning issues. This can be frustrating for the general public, as it is difficult to discern which office or person has the information being sought. A person may have to contact numerous individuals or departments in order to track down the information they need to conduct research, or to become involved in the planning process. Obtaining planning information can be a time-consuming and frustrating task. Improved access to information may encourage or make possible the participation of a more varied population in the planning process. As well, this would improve overall awareness of planning issues, and provoke discussion of new ideas.

There are many ways in which people can become involved in the planning process, including attending public meetings, public hearings or focus groups. Access to relevant background information, including plans, policies, maps and development applications, can improve the understanding of issues by all stakeholders. Increased access to relevant information leads to greater communication and interaction among participants (Shiffer 1992). Particularly as the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) continues its regional
planning efforts, it is timely to investigate the information needs of participants in the planning process. Such a study has not been conducted by Planning Services and Regional Planning at this time (Mellet 2002). The concurrent exploration of information needs alongside the regional planning process may provide valuable opportunities for disseminating new information and reviewing plans in the interim.

It can be difficult for the average public participant to become engaged in the planning process because of a limited understanding of the planning system (Bedford, Clark and Harrison 2002). If planners or councillors appear uninformed in the subject area, public confidence in the decision-making process is diminished. Citizen unfamiliarity with subject matter has made governments reluctant to include the public in decision-making processes (Bens 1994). Detrimental decisions are sometimes made due to a poor information base (Haughton 1999). This lack of awareness of planning issues in general, and in particular obscured perceptions of opportunities for involvement in various processes, are serious barriers to the creation of a plan that reflects community vision. These statements all reflect the importance of information in planning processes and decision-making.

In order to make resources available for equitable use by all parties, the types of information being sought must be determined. Ensuring that all participants (public, planners, councillors, developers) have the same access to information will help to level the playing field and improve the planning process. Public perception of planning, as well as the decision-making process, is generally negative (Davies 2001). Many feel that public participation opportunities are too little too late, and that input will not have any real
impact on decision-making (Bedford et al. 2002). Improving access to resources improves the way planning is perceived. An informed public is able to become actively involved in the seemingly complex network of planning processes.

This thesis approaches public participation, the role of information, and need for communicative processes from a macroscopic perspective. Current planning processes, including development applications, rezoning, plan formulation and amendments, as well as regional planning, provide many formal opportunities for citizen involvement. This research endeavours to address the bigger picture, that of increased awareness of and improved accessibility to planning issues by all members of the community. Need for improved awareness, communication and access to independent advice in order to strengthen current planning decision-making processes, as well as to provide new opportunities for civic engagement, will be demonstrated. “Planning” implies proactive processes; this investigation shows how to advance ideas about planning, rather than perpetuating current practices which are often reactive.

A central Planning Centre is proposed as a possible solution (see Chapter Five). It will have permanent and rotating exhibits, meeting space, resources and knowledgeable staff to provide information to the public, and will make visible planning efforts in the city, and create a new forum for collaborative, communicative planning. The Centre will promote a transparent, proactive planning process; as well, it will engage people who may not even be aware of planning and development decisions being made that affect their daily lives. Citizens generally only become actively involved in the planning process when there is an immediate concern or threat to their property or neighbourhood (Marshall and Roberts
1997). They also become concerned if decisions have serious environmental implications. There needs to be more general awareness of planning issues, and engagement of a broader section of the population in planning our future communities.

There is an extensive body of literature on the subject of access to information and participation, quality of information, transparency of the planning process and power relations in the political arena of planning. A focussed examination will determine how planning information needs can be met, and how awareness of planning issues in general and opportunities for meaningful involvement in the process can be improved. The current public participation scene is played out with a limited number of actors - even when the stage is open to “the public” the same faces keep turning up. There is little variation in the profile of such participants - relatively well-educated, articulate, middle-class citizens (Hillier 2000). An effective way of reaching the broader citizenship may provide new insights and ideas to a field which has become overwhelmingly process-oriented. It is important to identify under-represented groups (particularly politically-disinterested youth and marginalised socioeconomic groups) and increase awareness of planning issues which affect their lives.

A Planning Centre is consistent with the label Halifax has given itself of a “Smart City”. This implies more than a workforce based in Information Technology (IT) industries, or a reflection of numerous educational institutions of the HRM. The moniker suggests a commitment to learning, education and knowledge. These goals necessitate venues for the exhibition of ideas, an exchange of information and a critical review outside the politically-charged atmosphere of the current planning process. We cannot eliminate the need for
political public processes, such as information meetings and public hearings, because each of these serves a useful purpose within a democratic planning framework. Municipalities are required to develop a program for public participation concerning planning documents. And, in general, these participation opportunities have their merits (buy-in, consensus, ownership, etc.). What we can do is understand the various forces shaping participation, information use and the planning process in order to find a new way of meeting and surpassing needs. Improving current mechanisms and creating a new venue will increase opportunities for meaningful involvement in planning processes. Planning needs to assert itself as an important part of community life in the city. The general public may not always understand the degree to which planning decisions affect their lives, and they should be aware of opportunities to be heard and involved.

This proposal does not purport to replace or eliminate existing mechanisms for public involvement in planning decisions. Many of these opportunities are positive, and have led to increased citizen involvement since the inception of participation legislation over thirty years ago. This study will investigate how the planning scene in the urban core of the Halifax Regional Municipality (see Figure 3.1) can be broadened to include a wider diversity of participants, how opportunities for interaction can become more meaningful and how citizens can become actively engaged in the development and planning of their communities.

The intent of a Planning Centre is to create a positive planning atmosphere, and to improve perceptions and awareness of planning issues. By creating a location from which this energy and activity can emanate, the Planning Centre will facilitate learning and
improve involvement at all levels. A storefront resource centre for planning can benefit the entire community. A permanent presence in the city will create interest, excitement and exchange.

1.2 Objective and scope of research

The primary objective of this thesis is to consider the potential of increasing public awareness of planning issues in the HRM. In order to understand realistic ways of achieving this goal, the research explores literature on information and participation, studies issues relating to the distribution and collection of information, and uses this knowledge to develop a proposal. The scope of this work is as follows:

1. To understand how the literature on information and participation can guide program development and increase meaningful participation opportunities;
2. To identify information needs of participants in the planning process in the HRM;
3. To illustrate positive world examples that demonstrate criteria for increasing awareness of planning, and promote effective public engagement;
4. To develop a proposal for a Planning Centre, improving awareness and understanding of planning issues, engaging the community in planning for the HRM.

1.3 Thesis outline: developing a proposal for a planning centre

The body of this thesis is based on a perceived need for action to improve awareness of planning issues in the HRM; this culminates in the development of a proposal for a planning information centre. In order to determine the criteria which lead to effective participation processes and information exchange, an extensive study of the literature is
conducted. An assessment of the status quo provides the necessary background to formulate strategies to address unmet needs. World examples are examined as inspiration for local solutions.

Chapter Two offers theoretical perspectives on the role of information in effective public participation. The focus of the section narrows from a general overview of participation in planning, to the role that information plays in the process and finally to the importance of communication in information exchange. This investigation reveals criteria and principles for effective information communication, leading to mutual understanding of planning issues.

Chapter Three delves into the specific issue of understanding local planning information needs in the Halifax Regional Municipality. This section evaluates current methods of information dissemination and exchange, then conducts an Information Needs Assessment (INA) to uncover patterns of information use and difficulties in access. Analysis of the INA results provides insight into future program delivery options.

Chapter Four introduces three existing planning centres as inspiration for the Halifax model. The examples from The Netherlands, France and Japan are investigated in terms of the services provided, how they are organised, and their impact on the local planning profile and awareness in each respective city. These case studies provide possible models of how a planning information centre can operate successfully.
Chapter Five represents a synthesis of the literature examination, the INA, and the case studies into practicable solutions. This section outlines the lessons learned from this thesis investigation, possibilities for action, potential barriers, and develops a proposal for a planning information centre in Halifax.

Chapter Six summarises the contributions of this investigation to planning practice and theory. Particularly, lessons which may be extrapolated from this local intervention are highlighted. Areas for future research in the important field of planning promotion and education are outlined.
CHAPTER TWO
Theoretical perspectives on information in public participation

2.1 Introduction: how the literature guides proposal development
A substantial body of literature exists on the subject of public participation and the role of information in it. The discussions range from intensely theoretical perspectives, to power structures, to new technologies. Starting with a discussion of the increased presence of public participation schemes in planning, this chapter examines issues related to ensuring effective public participation processes. In order to provide a context for the development of a planning information centre, these examples from the literature are interpreted to determine criteria necessary to ensure effective information exchange, stakeholder participation and planning outcomes.

2.2 Participation in planning

“This despite the complexity of the subject of values, the basic argument here is straightforward: in answer to the leading question, ‘why do we plan?’, we must inevitably conclude that it is either to save or to enhance things we, as a society care about - in a word, that we value.” (Udy 1996: ii)

This broad statement about the goals of planning is certainly not new. Citizens are passionate about their neighbourhoods, and anxious to speak up against unwanted changes. This spirit caused an increased demand for public participation in the 1960s. As planning legislation began to appear in Canadian cities, so did the assertion of the democratic right to be informed and to be heard. As well, from a more pragmatic
perspective, the plans that were being developed by “expert” planners were dependent on consensus and public support. The profession responded to the demand for increased involvement in decision-making by the public, and coupled this with planning goals for plan acceptance and public buy-in. Thus, public participation in land use planning matters was born.

Given the political nature of planning processes, opportunities for public participation were not inherent in the system - they had to be created. The first legislative mechanism for public participation in land use planning came with the inception of the *Town and Country Planning Act* in Britain in 1968. In North America, ripples from Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* sparked awareness in environmental issues. It is no surprise, then, that the emergence of participation legislation in the United States and Canada came from environmental sources. In the United States, 1969 saw the creation of the National Environment Protection Act (NEPA); Canada followed suit with its Environmental Assessment and Review Process (EARP) in 1972. Both created opportunities for public involvement in decision-making that had not existed previously.

Participation in environmental discussions in North America spawned increased interest in political decision-making processes and encouraged more people to exercise their democratic right to be heard. This new-found public participation scheme soon trickled over to planning regulations. Since many environmentally-controversial land use planning projects already required environmental impact assessments (EIA) in order to be approved\(^1\), it was only natural that the review of planning proposals became a public

\(^1\)See the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act (CEAA) for a complete list of the types of projects requiring EIAs, as well as the public consultation processes used in each case (www.ceaa-acee.gc.ca).
activity. As citizens became more aware of planning decisions and their impacts, they demanded more opportunities for involvement (Marshall and Roberts 1997). People must live with consequences of such decisions, and thus are impassioned and emotional about being heard during decision-making processes.

Public participation in planning matters is required by statute, principles of administrative law, and is dictated by the local norms of political practice (Epstein 2002). In Nova Scotia, the Municipal Government Act (MGA 1998) sets the minimum standards for public involvement in planning processes, including provisions for open meetings and plebiscites (citizen votes). The authority of local governments to regulate participation as it relates to planning is clearly defined in Section 190(c) of Part VIII of the MGA:

“The purpose of this Part is to: ...
(c) establish a consultative process to ensure the right of the public to have access to information and to participate in the formulation of planning strategies and by-laws, including the right to be notified and heard before decisions are made pursuant to this Part;” (MGA 1998).

This clearly stipulates the expectations participants can have of municipalities in this province. As well, Section 204 (1) states that: “a council shall adopt, by policy, a public participation program concerning the preparation of all planning documents.” This section provides a considerable opportunity to set an effective framework for participation practices, however, it is often only used to set out prosaic processes. While the subsequent sections enable the council to use discretion in the nature of said participation schemes, there is a statutory requirement to “identify opportunities and establish ways
and means of seeking the opinions of the public concerning the proposed planning documents.” (MGA 1998: s.204 (3)). This law applies to strategies, bylaws and policies, but does not require public input in any other land use decisions. One might ask if politicians are simply meeting the legal requirement for participation, or if there is a sincere commitment to the necessity of citizen involvement in community decisions. Given the tokenism of inclusion efforts and lack of influence perceived by participants, the former is the likely motivation.

2.2.1 Public perception of participation in planning

Despite legal requirements, public participation is quite low, and perceptions of participation opportunities are seldom favourable (Davies 2001). This stems from several compounded misunderstandings on the part of the public (citizens, interest groups, government agencies), the proponents (planners, developers) and local government authorities (council, decision makers). The public have a general mistrust of government; they are wary of motivations, skeptical about information, and uneasy about “back room” decision-making. Citizens have reason to mistrust participation motives because many early participation mechanisms were merely tokenism (Arnstein 1969). While current processes strive to achieve broader-based participation, many citizens feel that their contributions are ignored or manipulated, sometimes used to legitimise the actions of planners and developers who have requirements to “consult” with the public.
Figure 2.1  Perception of participation: without redistribution of power, it can be empty and frustrating. French student poster reads: *I participate; you participate; he participates; we participate; you participate... They profit.*  
(Source: Arnstein 1969: 216)

A partial explanation for poor public perception of participation stems from the power structures implicit in early community consultation settings. In *A Ladder of Citizen Participation*, Sherry Arnstein (1969) reveals that the “empty ritual of participation” (Arnstein 1969: 216) can be made meaningful through a redistribution of power. Legislated participation processes have historically been viewed as token efforts, whereby citizens have been misinformed, coerced or manipulated in an attempt to legitimise the planning process. Many citizens are excluded from political and economic processes due to a lack of power. Arnstein argues that there are varying degrees of citizen participation, ranging from non-participation up to citizen control at the top of the ladder. The eight rungs of her “Ladder of Citizen Participation” begin with manipulation and
therapy, climb toward token efforts to inform, consult and placate the public, and reach the top rungs of power through partnerships, delegated power and finally citizen control (Arnstein 1969: 217). The lower rungs have little power, influence or accountability.

Arnstein (1969) also identifies several barriers to achieving genuine, effective participation, many of which still pervade our planning system. Those in powerful positions may be reluctant to cede any control or power to citizen groups. Other problems include racism and paternalism. Marginalised communities may not have the knowledge or resources to establish organised, representative interest groups through which to participate. As well, skepticism of the motivation of powerful groups can further increase the gap. Citizen advisory groups represent a positive step in overcoming certain barriers, if the input is taken into account. City council once held final veto power over all plans and decisions. Citizen groups in this province now have the ability to appeal decisions to the Nova Scotia Utilities and Review Board (NSUARB), which has the power to overturn council decisions. This is a positive step in assuring political accountability, enabling citizens and others to challenge council decisions.

Many governments are reluctant to include the general public in discussions about serious issues because they presume the public are unfamiliar with the content of the issues at hand (Bens 1994). Another problem with government accountability is the inconsistency between short-term political agendas and long-term planning goals. Planners and politicians strive to implement blanket policies, while individual citizens care most about the small neighbourhood scale impacts of land use decisions.
It is this political arena that causes the most controversy. The conventional “prepare-reveal-defend” process (Bedford et al. 2002) embodies the political nature of plan formulation and policy delivery. It is no wonder that citizens are not trusting of this process. Public involvement opportunities are perceived to occur too late in the process to be of any real influence on the final decision-making (Davies 2001, Bedford et al. 2002). Ideally, there would be continual, proactive dialogue about planning so that planners and developers understand how the community envisions its future and can assess developments and policies based on prescribed conditions; such a framework would reduce the need for reactionary participation opportunities.

While most plan development processes include public consultation in their early stages, the policy work is often done behind closed doors, then presented to the public for comment once it is, essentially, finished. There may be opportunities for minor alterations, but citizens perceive plans as finished products when they are presented to them, and are thus unlikely to challenge plan content. This process is derived from a system of experts - where planners and policy analysts are the ones qualified to interpret and develop policy. By preparing policies which strive to reflect community vision, planners give people a document to react to and critique. Citizens want to understand the implications of policies on the ground, and are less likely to be interested in their formulation.

Poor perception of public hearings and participation opportunities can be attributed to long, administrative meetings with limited opportunities for comments; the public feel that people running meetings are indifferent, and if participation were not required by
law, hypothesise that it would not be included (Lowry, Adler and Milner 1997). Current participation processes include limited dialogue and try to inform and educate the public, rather than engage them in discussing how to solve problems. Frustration and misunderstanding arise when “after several meetings, one group or constituency, such as government officials, effectively vetoes policies that others in the group find acceptable” (Lowry et al. 1997: 184).

Another problem arises: most potential objectors do not sufficiently understand the planning process to know when they are entitled to voice their opinion, and when their input will be taken into account by policy creators and decision makers (Bedford et al. 2002). While there are statutory requirements for participation and notice of hearings, many citizens are simply unaware of planning issues that may affect them. Conventional methods for notification in newspapers do not reach a broad enough spectrum of potential participants, particularly in an age where increasing numbers of people obtain information from other media sources. Again, marginalised groups (for example lower socio-economic groups, the illiterate or uneducated) are excluded from the process. The divide between the “informed” and “uninformed” continues to widen.

Information on the role and authority of municipal councils, and of opportunities for citizens to exert influence in decision making processes, is not always easy to locate. Legislation is available, however interpretation of policies and their implications for public participants is not often provided. Participants are often disadvantaged because they do not understand the complex rules and procedures associated with stating an opinion or preference in a political arena. Better comprehension of the process may foster
mutual respect amongst the public, planners and politicians. Many people are unaware that councils only have authority to evaluate an application on the basis of its compliance with accepted policies. Presentations of an emotional and personal nature are often dismissed by council because they do not legally have the authority to make those value judgments. Increased comprehension of this sort of information would enable participants to be better prepared, and use their five minutes in front of council in an effective way that can be acted upon. Transparency in participation processes, encouraged by helpful staff and planners, would enable people to get the advice they need without feeling their opinions are being misconstrued.

A study conducted by Malcolm Tait and Heather Campbell (2000) on the role of planning officers found that citizen opinions in opposition to those of the planning officer are likely to be pushed aside on the grounds of NIMBYism (Tait and Campbell 2000); the acronym NIMBY means “Not In My Back Yard”. While it is true that the public is more likely to be concerned, and thus get involved in the planning process when something new, large or different is proposed in their neighbourhood (Marshall and Roberts 1997), self interest should not be immediately dismissed as unfounded. The distinction between perception and fact must be made. The validity of information presented by the public is questioned by planners because of the numerous and varied sources from which people retrieve their information (Marshall and Roberts 1997). When opinions are based on suspect information sources, it is easy for planners and councillors to dismiss them.

Another problem is the widening gap between powerful players and the general public in the planning process. People with more power, resources and knowledge tend to shape
discussions (often because of access to professional representation) to the disadvantage of the average citizen (Hibbard and Lurie 2000). It is difficult to compete with well-researched and well-presented reports and information. This makes it more intimidating for an individual objector to speak at public meetings, so often they do not say anything at all. There is also concern on the part of citizens that the information created through community consultation processes is not an accurate representation of their values (Bens 1994). Then there are marginalised groups, who are often systematically excluded from participating in the process altogether (Yiftachel 1998).

Organisers of public participation processes may encounter problems themselves. The sheer quantity of information available on a variety of issues is overwhelming. Information overload is a serious potential problem (Marshall and Roberts 1997). Further confusion arises when a planner attempts to distill and disseminate large quantities of information - the reports provided may be criticised for their bias or selective representation of facts. The gap between “experts” and individuals is widened when staff are the primary information providers; this eliminates the direct “citizen-information nexus” (Hadden 1981: 546), and removes the individual responsibility to gather information.

There is strong political and academic support for increased public participation, however as of yet there has not been a significant revolution in planning practice (Davies 2001). Part of the problem is the practice itself; the bureaucratic nature of planning processes favours groups and individuals who are comfortable with the language and procedures. Since planning is seen as a reactive process (contrary to the forward thinking implication
of “planning”), the public does not always understand, and in some cases are not even aware, of the planning process.

Alternative forms of public input are not being given the same privileged consideration as “expert” opinions, which are often seen as more objective, or rooted in indisputable scientific information (Davies 2001). This devaluation of public input leads to further skepticism about the role and efficiency of current public participation practices. The system must learn to respect and trust alternate forms of public input. The public, according to Marshall and Roberts (1997), vary in their knowledge of the public process, the information they have about specific issues, their approaches to involvement, and may not agree with other citizens on the implications of the issues (Marshall and Roberts 1997). Provision of information and education are seen as ways of improving accessibility of the planning process to a wider citizenship. This process addresses citizens, as well as planners and politicians.

2.2.2 Approaches for effective participation

“Long, boring legislative or administrative meetings are being supplemented - and sometimes replaced - by open group processes that offer opportunities for mutual learning, collaboration, and even consensus agreements on development proposals, siting decisions, policy issues, and budget principles” (Lowry et al. 1997: 186).

Citizen involvement means more than simply voting or attending the occasional public meeting (Bens 1994). Engaging participants in planning issues and decision-making should be an integral goal of the profession. Meaningful participation opportunities can be
created with a demonstrated willingness to include the community in discussions, and the requisite skills needed to conduct effective public participation processes (Bens 1994). Planners can play an important role in effective processes through education and facilitation, once they gain citizens’ trust, by enabling people to become more informed and involved. Better citizens create a better society (Bens 2001).

In a study of the Jackson / Teton County (Wyoming) community planning process (from 1990-1994), Michael Hibbard and Susan Lurie (2000) reveal that in theory, planning must be participatory. In practice, they discovered, the process generally is encouraging participation, however this increased participation is not usually meaningful. Because of this, loss of public confidence in the government and planning could influence future participation attendance and outcomes. They suggest three lessons for improving participatory planning processes:

(1) Be clear and open about what issues planning can and cannot deal with;
(2) Design a realistic process for dialogue;
(3) Be clear about who is making the decisions (Hibbard and Lurie 2000).

There are varying degrees of public involvement in planning. People most often become involved because of individual interest or personal stake. Thus participation ranges from simple persuasion techniques to education, information sharing, consultation and shared decision-making (Marshall and Roberts 1997). Public involvement can be a source of information for planners and the public alike, providing opportunities for the discussion of facts, ideas and opinions. Katherine Warner (1988) focuses on three objectives for public involvement:
(1) Expanding the amount and usefulness of information available to both planners and publics;

(2) Providing a fuller opportunity for publics to affect and influence planning recommendations;


Ensuring mutual understanding and an element of certainty in the process will improve participation results and public support of planning initiatives. The average citizen can be put off by a seemingly complex process, or from past experiences in dealing with unresponsive public officials. Part of the problem is the domination of public participation processes by “experts”, including planners, politicians, consultants, and organised interest groups (Davies 2001), which further alienates the average citizen. In a true democracy, all citizens should be informed about how and why policies are formulated, and be able to influence the decision-making process (Bloomfield, Collins, Fry and Munton 2001).

The realities of participation in planning necessitate consideration of the political structure of the process and of decision-making. In order to develop politically-acceptable solutions, the process must include the communication of facts, ideas and opinions which enable participants and public officials to achieve mutual awareness and understanding of real problems and needs. Current practice offers many mechanisms for the distribution and collection of information and ideas, but reveals relatively few opportunities for exchange and mutual learning. More effective participation results from two-way transfer of information (Hillier 2000).
Planners have been viewed by citizens as “experts”, purveyors of information. This originates from a scientific model for planning practice; that is, the expert planner collects and develops information to respond to inquiries or solve problems imposed by decision makers (Innes 1998). Because of this notion, people either become skeptical of the information being provided to them, or conversely trust the planners blindly. Both situations emphasise the need for discussion and information exchange. It is more likely that people accept the information given to them, because it is often the only source available. However, planners are not the sole suppliers of information; local people can provide a wealth of first-hand knowledge to the process, if citizens are being listened to. Community groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also provide information.

Consultative approaches to planning have further increased disillusionment with participation processes. This method usually involves an organisation or government body “consulting” with a selected community or population in order to obtain information, and ideally buy-in, for planning endeavours. While this technocratic approach does provide opportunities for education, information sharing and negotiation, communities are skeptical of their role in the process. They struggle to see the connection between their input early on in the process, and the resultant plans and policies (if in fact there is any connection at all).

Alternatively, participation efforts where people are actually involved in some aspect of the decision-making process appeal more to citizens. A more positive approach is taken,
whereby participants feel their input and opinions matter, and will be considered in decisions. Planners are slow to adopt this method because it is more time-consuming than conventional “expert” methods, and much harder to reach consensus. Part of this reluctance stems from a general lack of understanding of planning issues and processes on the part of the public (Bens 2001), undermining the quality of information presented. The key to a more integrated approach to participation is an informed public, receptive planners, and a transparent communicative decision-making process.

Information is the key element that links the individual to the institution, the public to decision makers, and objective with evaluation (Tu 2000). It is also the thread that links traditional planning functions: problem diagnosis, goal setting, identification of alternatives, evaluation, implementation and monitoring. The following section examines the role that information plays in public participation.

2.3 The role of information in planning processes

“The history of citizen participation in the last 20 years can be loosely interpreted as a gradual expansion of the quality of information to which citizens felt they should have access. First, citizens sought to ensure that their goals and opinions were included in policy calculations. Soon, citizens realised that influence was dependent upon knowledge of the process by which decisions were made, so they pressed for sunshine laws and freedom of information. Without substantive information, however, the effectiveness of the other two kinds [goal/opinion and process information] were limited, and citizens are now employing participatory mechanisms to gain access to the facts they need” (Hadden 1981: 541).
This statement from over twenty years ago shows that the importance of information in planning is not a new idea. The Greeks believed that an educated citizenry would serve as the basis for a successful democracy. This concept pervades the planning system at all levels, and informed participation may help mitigate some of the previously discussed barriers to effective participation. In practice, however, there are some shortfalls in delivering accurate, unbiased information (Marcella and Baxter 2000) which is accessible to all citizens, public officials, developers, and councillors. Although relatively few students and academics are regularly engaged in public planning processes, this paradigm should shift to involve these purveyors of new ideas in the discussion about the future of communities.

Information is a mechanism for increasing awareness of planning issues. Not only does it increase the effectiveness of participation (Hadden 1981), information is also a key component of consensus building (Hanna 2000). Correct factual analysis and presentation in the public arena provide credible input to a process run by “experts”. If public participants can articulate their views in an informed and educated fashion, they are more likely to have an impact on decision-making. Information has the transformative ability to alter perceptions and mindsets before decisions are made (Hanna 2000). It can also frame or limit possible choices in a given situation (Innes 1998).

Information became embedded in the planning profession early on, when planners were first and foremost considered “experts”. It was their role to collect information and background reports in order to evaluate applications, policies and procedures. The planner as expert is still viewed as an important role by many (particularly councillors);
this notion places a great deal of responsibility on the planner, and, in their minds, absolves council of a certain degree of accountability. Countless planning decisions are based on reports prepared by “expert” planners and staff whom council and the public are in the habit of trusting. While it may not be possible to have completely unbiased reports, interpretation and advice should be provided to ensure mutual understanding of the issues by all parties. Recent demands from planning participants for second opinions and independent evaluation of applications may encourage this paradigm shift.

The rationality of the planning process and decision-making are supported by information. Each step in practical rational planning requires significant information and input; these actions include problem diagnosis, goal setting, development and evaluation of alternatives, implementation, and monitoring. Participation alone does not legitimise the planning process (Hanna 2000). Proper information enables the development of plans and policies (Shiffer 1992), ensures accountability in decision-making based on interrelated information (Shiffer 1992), and influences preferences of decision makers (Hillier 2000). The quality of plans is dependent on the amount of relevant information used to formulate problems, develop and evaluate alternatives, and make decisions (Shiffer 1992). Some argue that planners have little patience for public consultation because it serves to undermine their professional autonomy and ability to exert their independent professional judgment (Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger 1998).

In her article investigating the role of technical information in citizen participation, Susan Hadden (1981: 541) divides information into three basic types:
(1) **Goal / opinion information:** This type of information usually is the expression of concern, interest or opinion of citizens to government. Regarded by planners for its ability to ensure mutual understanding, goal / opinion information is not highly respected by decision makers. If solicited, goal / opinion information can be useful in the formulation of community vision.

(2) **Process information:** Directed from governments to citizens, process information explains procedures and how policy is going to be made. This could include publicising meetings and agendas, for example. Such information provision has been seen as encouraging participation to legitimise government actions and decisions (Arnstein 1969), particularly because of its top-down nature. However, there is potential for this type of information to demystify decision-making procedures and illuminate opportunities for involvement.

(3) **Substantive information:** More meaningful than the previous two information categories, substantive information (such as detailed physical, social and economic information) is necessary to involve citizens in more complex issues. The provision of technical and substantive information enables all participants to be on equal footing. Whereas the goal / opinion and process information represent one-way transfer, substantive information serves as a medium for exchange. In order to be useful, however, citizens must be aware of the procedures and processes to deliver information to planners and local government officials; thus, the three types of information must be used in combination.
Groups with strong organisational bases are most likely to make efficient use of information sources (Hadden 1981). They have the internal structure and resources to facilitate collection and effective use of information; individual citizens often struggle within a complex network of planning information sources. In a study of citizenship information needs in the United Kingdom, Marcella and Baxter (2000) found that 91.7% of the population saw access to information as necessary in enabling citizens to become involved; however, many respondents were unaware of existing sources of information (Marcella and Baxter 2000).

Information alone, however, cannot influence decisions. It is how the information is digested and presented that has the greatest power. Innes (1998) suggests that planners and decision makers use information as a lens through which to examine situations, and thus make better informed decisions. Information also enables participants to discuss and debate issues once a common understanding is established.

2.3.1 **Information: fostering mutual understanding**

“Planners must be able to do more than bring information to the table. They must also be able to understand what constitutes information in the community and they must be able to put it into play”

(Ozawa and Seltzer 1999: 264).

Concerted academic efforts to inform municipal policy makers have often failed (Szanton 1981). This reveals the outdated role of “expert” advice, and shows a need for more
deliberative decision-making procedures. Information is not meant to transform the process, rather to guide and form participants’ opinions. The link between participation and performance in planning is positive, but still weak (Black and Gregerson 1997). There is little evidence of a direct relationship between better information provision and the resultant decision-making, however it is implicit in the implementation of participation schemes. There would be little point of providing information to the public if it were not meant to help them understand the issues at hand. This lack of concrete evidence is due in part to the difficulty in linking elements of the participation process to the actual decisions being made.

There are substantial associations, however, between increased information and awareness in environmental matters (e.g. Haughton 1999, Hacklay 2002). The more informed people are, the more likely they are to participate in democratic processes (Marcella and Baxter 2000, Bens 2001), and the higher chance informed participants have of exerting influence in decision-making (Hadden 1981). Information is also seen to legitimise issues and lend credibility to public participation efforts (Innes 1988). In general, better information enables public and planners to speak the same language, and thus engage in more meaningful discussions. Disagreement on issues, solutions and consequences can result with insufficient information and understanding (Amdam 2000).

Planners have borne the greatest burden in the collection and dissemination of information, in part attributable to their authority and access to resources (Briggs 1998). In this role, they must serve as educators and facilitators, with particular attention focused on providing technical assistance to disadvantaged communities. The planner is
the logical connection for citizens in terms of mobilising and engaging people, informing and educating, and involving the public in meaningful discussions about the future of their communities. Planners have the advantageous position of being able to initiate mutual learning, making face-to-face encounters more productive for all involved. Citizens may experience difficulty in framing appropriate questions, due to lack of understanding of the issues and processes related to planning (Hadden 1981). The planner, then, is the key agent in promoting awareness and encouraging citizen involvement in planning.

Part of the problem in information transmission is a lack of citizen comprehension of technical reports. The general public do not necessarily have the requisite background knowledge in planning-related disciplines to understand fully the implications of the information provided. Scientific reports present particular difficulty; as environmental concerns become more prominent in opposing development applications and by-law amendments, the public, politicians and planners alike will require more technical information. Easily and appropriately interpreted materials must be provided to all participants in the planning process (Hadden 1981).

![Diagram](resources.png)

**Figure 2.2** How information provides enabling tools for participation.
(Source: Adapted from Tammet n.d.)
Figure 2.2 (above) illustrates the relationship between information provision and the end goal of increased participation. While the medium of delivery may influence the credibility or validity of planning information, it is not the only consideration. The important lesson here is the enabling quality of access to information: it promotes engagement of individuals and communities, provides people with better resources (in other words, tools) with which to approach the planning process, and mobilises communities to take action.

2.3.2 Power plays: issues of information control and access

“Power... produces that knowledge and that rationality which is conducive to the reality it wants” (Flyvbjerg 1998: 36).

Whether intentional or not, the control of information is an assertion of power (Forester 1989, 1993 and 1999). It is well known that knowledge can represent power, and nowhere is this more evident than in political processes. According to Forester (1993), by limiting access to decision-making processes and communicative infrastructure, planning directly affects societal power relations (Forester 1993). Powerful groups can take advantage of unequal access to information to further undermine the less powerful (Innes 1998, Haughton 1999). The public are reluctant to trust powerful groups due to perceived ulterior motives for proposed changes.

As well, increased coverage of planning issues in the media may make citizens more critical of institutionally provided information (Hadden 1981), particularly where distortions in information are perceived (Hanna 2000) and where uneven power structures
exist. In particular, a lack of information can lead to speculation and misinformation, spawning rumours which planners and information providers then have to dispel. Providing up-front, accurate information will minimise the amount of time spent rehashing the issues, and enable more productive discussions about possibilities.

The profession of planning was conceived and justified as a rational activity with the intent of achieving some sort of public good; this process also serves to advance less desirable goals including social oppression, economic inefficiency, male domination and ethnic marginalisation (Yiftachel 1998). Zoning, in fact, was introduced to segregate uses in order to protect the interests (and property values) of society’s elite class. Formal rationalisation for separating obnoxious industrial uses from residential areas was to improve public health. While the introduction of public participation mechanisms was intended to empower citizens and improve the perception of the profession, intricate power plays and elements of social control are prominent in today’s practice.

Yiftachel (1998) goes on to argue that the same tools promoted to assist social reform and improve quality of life can be used to control and repress peripheral groups (Yiftachel 1998). Reorganisation of departments, along with inconsistent administrative boundaries, further confuses the public, who may already be struggling to comprehend their place in a complex system. Foucault (1972) argues that the powerful (states and elites) use and manipulate information to maintain control over people (Foucault 1972). Coupled with meaningless forms of participation, top-down information control imposes decisions on unsuspecting publics (Hanna 2000). Information must be provided in a way which mitigates potential manipulation and control. Even the best intentioned public
consultation schemes inherently come from a centre of power to the general population (Bloomfield, Collins, Fry and Munton 1999); efforts must be made to level the playing field through better communication methods.

Political power often controls the outcome of public participation events. Forester (1989) discusses the ability to set agendas, which he sees as “controlling which citizens find out what and when, about which projects, which options, and what they might be able to do as a result” (Forester 1989: 44). In turn, this tends to diminish general awareness and broad involvement. This assertion of power by local governments may not be intentional, but it raises some important considerations. First, the planning profession may not be able to reach the identified “concerned public” by conventional means, further distorting who gets what information. Second, individuals may not even know they are seeking certain materials or interpretations of data - why would they bother to go looking for it? And finally, this method of agenda setting indoctrinates planning as an expert profession, whereby a select few have enough knowledge and background to prioritise information, and determine acceptable options.

This last point is of particular concern in participatory decision-making. If citizens and other participants do not question the information provided to them, and simply make choices based on the pre-packaged options, the opportunity to address council and planners becomes a trivial one.

The planning profession must be cognizant of the intrinsic connection between knowledge and power (Hillier 2000) and work to overcome societal barriers to participation. The
professionalisation of planning has exacerbated the information divide, making active engagement in planning decisions more challenging (Haughton 1999). Better communication could provide a partial solution to the power plays in participatory planning; it can empower those with knowledge about the role of power and culture in talk (Briggs 1998). Planning education often overlooks elements of human communication, to the detriment of scholars and future planning professionals. With increased focus on developing communication skills to overcome power relationships, planners might more effectively fulfill their role as facilitators of social learning.

The social aspects of information gathering are often overlooked. Informal networks reinforce the idea that “who you know, not what you know” determines power relationships. This tactical approach to participation exerts considerable influence over decision makers. The strength, organisation, strategy, political contacts and influence created outside formal participation processes favour the articulate, well connected and wealthy members of society (Hillier 2000). Planners (and the general public) must be aware of informal networks and of the persuasion that occurs outside the formal participation arena in order to comprehend fully the forces shaping decisions. The impact of informal political power is usually invisible, occurring outside public meeting and hearing venues. The general public may not be aware of such structures, opportunities and influences, and this may cause even more skepticism over policy decisions. “When information is most influential, it is also most invisible” (Innes 1998: 54).

The need for increased interaction and communication in community policy decisions is reinforced by the notion that information itself has no influence unless it represents a
socially constructed and shared understanding of all participants (Innes 1998). Informal discussions, community workshops and design charrettes have tremendous potential to create new, common understanding and consensus based on real interaction. True citizen engagement can occur through communication and knowledge-sharing experiences. Planning decisions are based on a vision of the future, as no one possesses definite information. Predictive tools and modeling are useful, but true understanding comes from negotiation and dialogue (Amdam 2000).

It is the planner’s role to serve as information broker and “organiser of public attention” (Forester 1989: 20). While this may appear to be an overwhelming responsibility, the authority to do so provides many intriguing opportunities to change the system.

### 2.4 Information communication in public participation

“What planners do most of the time is talk and interact” (Innes 1998: 52).

The task of improving awareness of planning issues and processes presents many challenges and opportunities. The previous section revealed ways in which information plays a role in increasing validity of public comments, and provides necessary resources for community mobilisation. Planning is a profession based on communication of information and ideas, evaluation of alternatives, and presentation of options to the public and council. As natural communicators and conduits of information, planners must serve a role in transforming perceptions of planning. They must seek actively to involve people affected by planning decisions and policies (Campbell and Marshall 2000). Planners have
a vital role in shaping public learning and actions; they can nurture public hope or deepen citizens’ resignation by sharing or withholding information, and by encouraging or impeding public participation (Forester 1999).

Improvements in participation opportunities have generally come from citizens’ demands, rather than visionary (or responsible) initiatives of those in power. Advisory committees, community groups and *ad hoc* policy coalitions have served to partially redistribute power in a planning system which has traditionally maintained a top-down approach to decision-making. This progress can be advanced further by removing an important barrier: access to relevant, unbiased information and support. Information control and manipulation are key ways in which the powerful can limit options and influence decisions. The citizens who have been successful in their requests for more meaningful participation opportunities must insist on transparent information exchange as a critical next step in leveling the playing field.

There are many ways in which to transmit, receive and communicate information. Warner (1988) divides information communication into three modes: presentation, receipt and exchange. These modes can alternately be termed awareness, feedback and communication (see Figure 2.3). Dandekar (1988) and others (Moore and Davis 1997, Al-Kodmany 2000 and Hacklay 2002) advocate using diverse approaches and techniques to ensure effective information exchange. Informal processes, which occur outside the formal political arena of planning, create opportunities for probing the interests that lie beneath positions (Lowry et al. 1997).
Ten approaches to information exchange are discussed in Moore and Davis’ (1997) publication, *Participation Tools for Better Land Use Planning: Techniques and Case Studies*. These are described below, with commentary on the potential of each technique in improving information communication and understanding of community values in planning.

(1) **Computer simulation:** This technique enables participants to visualise potential physical changes in their communities. Using computer simulation, many elements can be considered and evaluated, such as streetscapes, building heights, landscaping and other design features. This method provides a venue for discussion, and enables participants to see the effects of plans and policies on the built environment. Images illustrating differences to the community before and after development can help residents make informed choices on proposed projects.
(2) **Simulation exercises:** Citizens are involved in creating a land use plan for their community by placing “icons” representing different uses and options on a base map. This hands-on approach engages participants in developing a desired future land use picture, through individual expression and reaching consensus with the other group members.

(3) **Guided tours:** Residents can provide a wealth of local knowledge to the planning process. They are aware of natural and cultural assets in their communities, and are passionate about them. This technique brings together diverse participants, who experience a chosen site or environment together to gain knowledge of the existing situation, and to arrive at mutually acceptable solutions. This approach is effective in enabling participants to understand each other and the lay of the land. An informal shared experience in the natural environment is conducive to stimulating discussion and fostering learning (Hayden 1999).

(4) **Design charrettes:** The charrette is a commonly used participatory planning tool whereby stakeholders are given the task of developing a plan for a particular site or neighbourhood. With the assistance of professionals adept in design, community members discuss and draw how they see certain parts of their city developing. The process can be short and intensive or last several days, but the resultant plan comes from extensive discussion and collaborative design creation.
(5) **Visual Preference Survey**™ (VPS): Developed by A. Nelessen Associates, the Visual Preference Survey™ (VPS) presents citizens with images of the natural and built environments, and asks participants to reveal their preferences which are then ranked. This enables people to discuss the character and appearance of their community, and develop a visual plan based on the results. This method provides something to react to, rather than simply asking people to articulate verbally elements they like and dislike. It also provides a venue for dialogue amongst participants on the appearance and quality of future development, heightening awareness of tradeoffs inherent in planning.

(6) **Visioning**: Visioning occurs (or should occur) prior to plan formulation, major development decisions and other planning activities. This process engages citizens and stakeholders in developing a common vision for the future of their communities. Through meetings, workshops, surveys and discussions, members of visioning groups develop written statements of long-term community goals intended to shape policies and subsequent decisions. This dialogue enables the sharing of perspectives on future vision for people and places.

(7) **Public relations campaigns / media strategies**: Media campaigns can dramatically increase awareness (and support) of planning decisions and processes. This strategy is also effective in encouraging citizen participation. Promotions are effective when there is one clear message or issue being addressed, and the message is reiterated. Public awareness is key to active participation in local issues; governments and agencies are increasingly using media campaigns to inform citizens about planning discussions and events.
(8) Facilitated meetings and groups: Representatives of many diverse groups communicate with the assistance of a facilitator (deemed fair and acceptable by all participants). They discuss issues and negotiate alternatives to develop actionable, mutually-acceptable solutions. This process involves communication of interests from various perspectives, mediated by a facilitator if necessary to ensure an open process with opportunities for all opinions and ideas to be heard.

(9) Formal neighbourhood groups: These groups are often the agents of information transmission within their respective communities. The role of discussions between local governments and these groups is not to respond to acute crisis situations, nor to placate the community, but rather to foster meaningful and on-going communication. Direct contact between government and community members is achieved, and serves to convey accurately community ideas and validate local opinions within a complex planning setting.

(10) Involve youth in planning: Planning discussions invariably talk about the future of communities, and often participants advocate for children’s interests or safety. Approaches that involve youth directly in decision-making about the future offer fresh, energetic perspectives that may reveal new ideas about how to do things. They are an important constituency, and a vital community resource. Involving youth in planning encourages parental involvement as well; empowering children will ensure future support of planning initiatives because they are informed and involved citizens.
For each of the above participatory techniques to function optimally, an appropriate location has to be chosen. Collaborative planning requires appropriate processes to facilitate and encourage communication; it is also dependent on the right space (physical and perceptual) for interaction (Davies 2001). Providing a venue for interaction which is open, fair, inclusive and legitimate is necessary. However, most participation opportunities and planning discussions occur in the politically-charged arena of council meetings. This decreases confidence and increases suspicion of government motivations for including public participation opportunities. Most citizens are wary of government venues due to skepticism of past attempts to involve the community through misdirected “participation” schemes. If the municipal planning department initiates and nurtures a positive participation environment, they may gain public confidence in the process and its outcomes. Venues for effective communication ideally have no visible affiliation with any party involved; if the location of the meeting becomes controversial, it is next to impossible to resolve planning issues. Sometimes schools and churches are used for group processes because they provide an environment conducive to open discussion (and sizable rooms to accommodate large numbers of participants). As well, these locations are generally available in the evenings when most potential participants have the time to become engaged in discussions about their communities.

Confidence in local government can be fostered through cooperation of participants and mutual learning (Amdam 2000). Such learning is derived from active participation. This circle reinforces itself, and information exchange plays a critical role in facilitating dialogue. Another form of confidence, the ability to assert oneself in a participation setting, can be supported by information. This assuredness stimulates wider civic
engagement, which will help to restore citizen trust of local governments (Bloomfield et al. 1999).

Hadden’s (1981) discussion of the “Science for Citizens” program in the United States is an excellent example of the need for permanent organisations to deliver information to citizens. The program is based on the following three assumptions: citizens need information in order to participate; they will be able to make use of the information provided; and informed participation will be an improvement over the current situation (Hadden 1981). Staff must be aware of technical, procedural and policy information, but must also be well versed in the diverse topics relating to planning decisions.

2.4.1 The communicative turn in planning

There is more information available today from various sources than in the past. In the contemporary Information Age, information is the new currency, and it flows much more freely than ever before. People can download documents and reports from the Internet in seconds; informative (and junk) mailings increasingly find their way to mailboxes; television, radio, newspapers and other popular media are more prevalent and accessible. We are literally bombarded by information. The resulting information overload perpetuates apathy in society. As well, the desire to retrieve information may not be the first thing people think of when they are uninformed: “I don’t understand it anyway, so what’s the point of me getting more information?” (Davies 2001: 208). The problem is a lack of interpretation and synthesis of relevant information in order to make it easily accessible to a broad audience (Hanna 2000).
Information and communication are embedded in planning practice. The perceptions that planners develop through participation processes and information exchange can enable a common understanding, and in effect create meaning (Innes 1998). Planners are accountable for the accuracy and interpretation of information, particularly in assuring consistency between policies and the data used to arrive at them (Innes 1988). Increasing the amount and quality of publicly available information will encourage citizens to ensure accountability of planners and developers. It may also make councillors, politicians and planners more vigilant in seeking information and verifying what they distribute publicly.

**Figure 2.4** Mapping theory and practice. (Source: Adapted from Ozawa and Seltzer 1999).

Figure 2.4 (above) demonstrates the shift from predominantly rational, academic planning models to a practice based in communication. Without delving too deeply into the theoretical musings of Habermas and Foucault, it is important to discuss the communicative turn in planning. Jurgen Habermas (1984) desires to reconstruct the public realm so that it reflects our ways of knowing and reasoning, as opposed to perpetuating
the current mode of instrumental rationality and dominant interests of bureaucratic
powers (Healey 1996). He argues the power of “better argument”, informed by
knowledge, as a way to transform current power structures. Sociologist Michael Foucault
also sees the hidden power systems embedded in communication (Foucault 1972). His
ideas strongly support communicative planning efforts which attempt to recognise and
overcome power through meaningful interaction of participants.

2.4.2 The role of new technologies

“User participation is meaningless if participants cannot understand what
is being proposed” (Al-Kodmany 2000: 220).

Discussion of the importance of information exchange in planning would not be complete
without addressing opportunities provided by advances in technology. In Canada, over
60% of households comprise at least one regular Internet user (Statistics Canada 2001).
This proportion is slightly lower in Nova Scotia (57.4%). There is a wealth of
information available online, and an increasing repertoire of computer tools which make
certain planning analyses quick and relatively painless. Decentralisation of services has
served to diversify potential sources of information (Batty 1990). Technology may be
able to create new ways of involving citizens in the planning process (Jerschow 1999), or
may be able to increase the effectiveness of participation with new techniques. This
treatment of technology will briefly outline some opportunities as well as constraints
imposed by new technologies.

The Internet is probably the most widely-touted vehicle for information transmission. It
has the promise (and ability) to deliver the exact piece of information being sought faster and easier than traditional forms (Hacklay 2002). The diversity in information, as well as the potential detail of Internet materials, is incredible. People can navigate through local and provincial government web sites to find out about meetings, projects, legislation and obtain reports. The Internet is increasingly popular with community groups as a way of informing their members.

Despite its many benefits, the Internet may not be the ideal tool for information exchange. A significant amount of information is provided (one-way communication), while less is taken in. Opportunities for discussion and exchange occur through electronic mail, bulletin boards and newsgroups, but an essential human element is missing: face-to-face dialogue. New technology enables collaboration of researchers, academics and colleagues transcending national boundaries. However, in many parts of the world Internet access is quite limited.

While computer technology is being used to empower people and communities in many places, it marginalises others. Issues relating to access and selective participation threaten to exclude certain groups from participation (e.g. Al-Kodmany 2000, Marcella and Baxter 2000). Educational institutions and government agencies must provide financial support and technical expertise for low-income communities if computer technology is to be an integral component of participation processes (Al-Kodmany 2000). Better access to technology such as computers may help citizens become better informed and thus more involved in the process.
There is great potential for the digitisation of information (Muir 1998), making retrieval and storage of large quantities of data, maps and other documents much simpler. While the amount of paper used has actually increased in the digital age (due to printing readily-available electronic documents), the need for filing cabinets and offices replete with paper copies of all planning-related information has become obsolete. Distribution and management of paper copies is quite costly, whereas once information is digitised it is relatively simple and cost-effective to manage. Creating digital files may enable broader access to information as well, since people would be able to obtain information remotely. Digital information provides a wider variety of options for use and integration of information, and can thus increase the overall quality of information available. However, in ‘going digital’, we must realise that many people and groups do not have access to computers and the Internet. Of particular concern is the fact that groups which are already disadvantaged in public participation schemes may be further marginalised as the use of technology increases.

Visualisation techniques may serve as a common language between so-called experts and the general public in order to eliminate technical jargon and barriers to comprehension. Since planning decisions often relate to specific sites, graphic representation of options is an effective way for all participants to understand how the proposal will affect their community. People have a definite preference for processed and interpreted information such as maps produced using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) over raw data and technical reports (Hacklay 2002). The role of GIS in facilitating visualisation of options, particularly the overlaying of various types of information, has great potential. The system has the unique ability to translate complex data sets and spatial information into
simple visuals that are easy to understand (Al-Kodmany 2000).

Visualisation techniques including GIS still require a certain level of expertise and training in order to interpret data, maps and overlays (Al-Kodmany 2000). This emphasises the need to offer many alternative forms of information, such as models, maps and reports in order to stimulate discussion and facilitate comprehension. Planners may not need to know how to program GIS or input digital data, but they must know what the system is capable of doing, and what questions to ask.

The use of GIS in participatory planning is beginning to be explored (Al-Kodmany 2000, Tu 2000), revealing its potential and limitations. Al-Kodmany (2000) used visualisation in an inventive way to increase understanding and participation in land use planning. In his study, GIS technology was used in combination with an artist to enable technical and nontechnical participants to communicate. GIS was used to present the big picture, while the artist was able to conceptualise, on the spot, design ideas and changes the participants articulated. This successfully removed the delay and back room aspects associated with modifying drawings and maps, thus ‘demystifying’ the process of translating ideas into design. The approach also increased participants’ sense of meaningful involvement in the process (Al-Kodmany 2000), and enabled informed discussions, facilitating consensus.

Several potential barriers to more widespread use of GIS technology exist. First, there is considerable expense associated with acquiring and maintaining required hardware, software and data. Second, staff must be trained how to use the GIS effectively to take advantage of its capabilities. Finally, as with any approach to communication,
visualisation or participation in planning, a variety of techniques must be employed. Information communication technologies (ICT) require competency to interpret and use them effectively. ICT literacy is defined as “using digital technology, communications tools, and/or networks to access, manage, integrate, evaluate, and create information in order to function in a knowledge society” (IICT 2002). The Internet and GIS are tools that can be used to make certain processes more streamlined, or to enhance comprehension of large quantities of information. These technological advances must be accompanied by proper education, and cannot replace other methods entirely, particularly human interaction and communication.

2.5 Learning from the literature: principles and criteria

The discussion of the literature has revealed many barriers and principles for increased understanding and effective participation. Since the goal of this thesis is to discern opportunities for increasing awareness and promoting meaningful participation in a variety of planning processes, these terms must be qualified, and current practices in the HRM must be examined for strengths and deficiencies. The following principles should be considered in developing and evaluating solutions.

Any proposal to promote awareness and increase opportunities for meaningful engagement will be guided by the above principles. The best option for the HRM will incorporate these criteria, as well as be tailored to specific local needs (as discerned in Section 3.5). This directs the development of a proposal to increase planning awareness in the HRM.
Table 2.1  Principles and criteria for effective participation, information and communication in planning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Principles and criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Participation in planning (Section 2.2) | 1. Encourage participation based on issues of interest (such as the environment) - there is a potential opportunity to engage participants in broader discussions.  
2. Strive for proactive planning, with opportunities for earlier involvement (particularly in visioning, strategy formulation and ultimately decision-making).  
3. Promoting open and interactive discussions on general planning issues (rather than surrounding specific developments or proposals) assuages public skepticism of planners and developers. Encourage mutual trust and understanding.  
4. Improve public perception of planning by engaging participants in a wider variety of processes. |
| Role of Information (Section 2.3) | 5. Focus on active engagement of participants, rather than simply “educating” the public. Support this with information.  
6. Provide accurate, easily interpreted information to all participants prior to discussion. This includes background information, policies, and reports, as well as process information.  
7. Recognise and deconstruct power structures (particularly with respect to control of and access to information).  
8. Find an appropriate venue for information exchange. |
| Information communication (Section 2.4) | 9. Involve a broader spectrum of the population through open, consultative processes to mitigate power structures and accurately discern community concerns.  
10. Promote two-way information and idea exchange.  
11. Provide a wide variety of processes, each of which is accessible or inviting to different groups and various issues.  
12. Learn to value alternative forms of input and community dialogue.  
13. Effectively integrate new technologies to complement current approaches and processes. This necessitates financial and educational support, particularly for GIS.  
14. Maximise opportunities to use new and diverse techniques to increase effectiveness of information communication and exchange. |
CHAPTER THREE
Planning information in the HRM: Sources and needs

3.1 Informed participation: the key to effective participation

The perception of planning in the HRM is not particularly favourable; mention “planning” to the average Haligonian and they will likely suggest that we need some. Downtown examples like Scotia Square, Maritime Centre and Cogswell Interchange are what come to mind for many when the topic of planning is considered. There are sprawling suburbs, abandoned downtown buildings in Dartmouth and Halifax, and traffic headaches throughout the municipality. With few positive examples of planning in the city, the general public have a hard time getting excited about planning initiatives and discussions. Survey respondents suggest that outdated plans and policies reflect a lack of vision and passion on the part of the HRM. Undertakings such as Regional Planning inherently create energy and excitement about planning for the future; however, participants in community consultation struggle to see how their input is being integrated in regional strategies. People generally become involved in planning discussions because of immediate threat to their quality of life or neighbourhood, not because of genuine interest or involvement in big picture issues.

The literature review has shown that information and communication are critical to increasing meaningful participation opportunities in planning processes. Personal conversations with planners and councillors also supported this idea. They indicated that participation efforts would be more productive and worthwhile if people knew what they
were talking about. As well, they expressed a need for participants to understand the process, enabling more useful input and respect of council procedures.

For example, at a recent public hearing of Chebucto Community Council (February 3, 2003), the chair reminded the public of the rules followed by council, and emphasised that council could only base their decision on an application addressing concrete policy issues. Council does not have the authority to evaluate a proposal based on value judgments, i.e. whether it is good or bad development. This explanation helped participants to frame their input around policies, which was helpful to the councillors. It also let them know how their input would be considered by council. This was the only meeting attended where such an explanation preceded the discussion. In practice, this type of explanation is more prevalent because of a perceived need for participants to understand the system; it is not, however, a requirement for planners or councillors to explain the process at public meetings and hearings.

Something that may confuse participants is the fact that council is not bound to follow the advice provided by professional staff or the public (Epstein 2002). The public do not always understand why decisions are made, particularly after overwhelming information and evidence was provided in public participation venues for or against a proposal. Part of the problem is the political nature of public meetings, and the fact that most speakers show up to oppose proposals. While this critical mass of complainants makes citizens feel confident a motion will be quashed, their concerns may not be relevant to the matters of policy which council can assess. There may also be concerns which are not being voiced; at a meeting which is overwhelmingly biased toward one side, much courage is
required to express an opposing viewpoint. Encouraging transparency in decision-making processes, as well as including meaningful opportunities for public debate and discussion, will improve the perception of political decision-making processes.

In order to increase awareness and improve perceptions of planning issues, strategic changes in information and service provision must be made to create more meaningful opportunities for involvement and engagement. Understanding current methods of information provision, and exploring information needs, will enable these strategic changes to be identified and made. The key principles for effective participation and information exchange are outlined in Section 2.5; combined with an evaluation of current practices and needs, basis for improvement will be discerned. The following section identifies current information provision and exchange mechanisms in the planning process in the HRM.

3.2 Understanding information needs in the HRM

Prior to proposing changes in the provision of information, current modes of collection, distribution and communication of information in the HRM were researched. Perceived needs of various stakeholders were also investigated as a means of discerning deficiencies and strengths, with the intent of developing a plan for improving access to planning-related information in the HRM.
3.2.1 Current methods of transmitting information

Information OUT:

For many citizens, initial awareness of local planning issues begins when they receive notice from the municipality regarding a development proposal in their neighbourhood. This notification is often the only way people find out about what is occurring in their backyards. The targeted audience is limited to a particular area. Notices of public hearings are printed in the newspaper, but the issue is usually of concern to local residents only.

Municipal planning offices are a logical source of information about planning. Staff can provide copies of documents to respond to queries and disseminate staff reports. The people who work there should be the most informed and knowledgeable about planning issues in the HRM. They are also responsible for mail outs, newspaper advertisements and other forms of notification. Planning staff produce flyers, newspaper notices and letters informing adjacent landowners of proposals and public hearings. Currently, the HRM has six Customer Information Centres (CIC), three of which are Power Centres, home to Planning and Development Services and other departments. These Power Centres, located in Halifax, Dartmouth and Sackville, offer a wide variety of municipal services, such as tax payments, permit applications and information on by-laws.

Another place people turn for advice is the HRM web site (www.region.halifax.ns.ca). Notices of public meetings, council minutes and HRM by-laws can be found on the municipal site. Web perusers can obtain legislation from the province’s web site, however the Municipal Planning Strategy (MPS) for Halifax is notably absent from the HRM page. The Planning and Development page (www.region.halifax.ns.ca/planning) contains
information on projects such as the Halifax Urban Greenway, Vision 20/20 and a link to the Halifax Waterfront Plan Review. Contact information is provided for several departments and individuals, although what these people actually do is not clear. The site refers people to the CICs for further information. There is useful information provided through HRM’s main web site, however the connections to materials from the Planning and Development are limited or lacking. Currently, it is not a priority for the HRM to identify the types of information that could be provided or improved on the web site (Harnish 2003). In order to provide necessary, up-to-date information, this should be investigated. To preserve accuracy of documentation, PDF (portable document format) should be used; this ensures that electronic documents are not tampered with.

People without access to computers often turn to the general HRM information line (490-4000) as a first stop. The friendly staff are able to transfer you to someone who may be able to answer your question, or at least you can get to their voice mail box. A commonly used information source, particularly when specific proposals or developments are of concern, is the Municipal Clerk’s Office. The office is required to maintain copies of relevant documents, and staff are willing and able to provide callers and visitors with copies of staff reports and meeting minutes. Interpretation of these documents, however, is not generally available through the Clerk’s Office. The following flow charts are available which outline the process for the following planning applications: HRM Land Use By-law Amendment Process; HRM Rezoning Process; HRM Development Agreement Process; and HRM Plan Amendment Process (Harnish 2003). These charts are given to members of the public when they express an interest in going through one of the processes, but are not available electronically. The Provincial web site has some

One important venue for information distribution is the public information meeting. This occasion occurs when a developer presents their plan to the community before a formal public hearing. It is intended to provide background to participants, and enable them to ask any questions or express concerns. This informal opportunity provides the developers and planners with feedback that may be incorporated into plan revisions before being passed to council. Attendees are provided with written information, as well as verbal and visual presentation of the planning procedure and the development proposal.

Public meetings also serve as transmitters of information. While most people who attend these gatherings have a basic understanding of the issues at hand, others may be there to obtain more information on the subject. Municipal staff provide copies of staff reports and development applications, as well as previous meeting notes, to the public in attendance. Copies of these documents are also available prior to the meeting, eliminating the need for people to spend the first part of the meeting reading the information provided.

Local newspapers and radio stations are increasingly covering planning-related issues because they are contentious in the city. Recently, The Coast had a planning cover story about the Brewery Market development proposal (Volume 10, Number 32: January 16-23 2003). This extensive coverage may have served to increase awareness about planning
on the waterfront, however given the number of people at the public information meeting on December 5, 2002 (the “biggest one I’ve ever had”, according to councillor Dawn Sloane), people were already aware of the issue. *The Coast* also devoted several pages to cover the controversial Kimberly Lloyd development proposal in the February 6-13 edition. This local weekly is also a forum for public exchange of opinions on planning-related subjects (see Appendix B for examples of planning-related editorials from *The Coast*).

**Information IN:**

Recently in planning practice, there has been an impetus to obtain more community input and expertise before formulating plans and development proposals. This can help ensure that plans actually represent what the community would like to see in the future. As well, local people are a wealth of information and a resource in the provision and collection of specific neighbourhood information. Finding a role for non-traditional, subjective information is both a challenge and an opportunity for planners. Visioning sessions and focus groups are quite effective at discerning and communicating community values.

Citizens most frequently contact their councillors if they have a specific concern or issue to discuss. It is hoped that these concerns can either be dealt with, information can be provided, or the councillor can express them at the next council meeting. It must be challenging for a councillor to accurately represent an entire constituency’s opinions. Therefore, it is important to incorporate a wide variety of mechanisms to obtain representative community input.
Currently, information that is obtained about the community and its values provides a snapshot of the big picture. Continual dialogue can ensure that planners, politicians and developers have an accurate and up-to-date understanding of community values. A common means of discerning citizen concerns surrounding a particular issue is to establish *ad hoc* planning committees. These groups enable representatives from the community to become involved in discussions and solution development. They provide information to planners and the municipality.

**Information EXCHANGE:**

Increasingly, citizens are becoming more involved in planning discussions. The creation of Planning Advisory Committees (PAC), advisory boards and formal community groups serves to expand opportunities for meaningful participation. PACs are valuable as they involve staff members who are accountable to the community-run group, enabling free flow of resources and information. Planners can benefit from direct participation in PACs or by networking with them; members take the information provided to them by the planner and transmit it to the community. PACs have the ability to advise council, and even though council is not bound to use this information to make decisions (Epstein 2002), citizens have a much greater chance of influencing decisions because their reasons are presented in a coherent, policy-oriented manner. However, in the HRM PACs are created arbitrarily, usually in response to a councillor’s request. By requiring PACs in each district, opportunities for involvement in all parts of the HRM would be improved.
Other types of boards and committees which can enhance participation and information exchange exist. The Halifax / Halifax County Watershed Advisory Board (WAB), for example, reviews applications and policies which may have a direct or indirect impact on watersheds and watercourses in the region. Composed of scientists, professionals and other interested individuals, this group fulfills a specific role and serves as the environment’s watchdog in planning and development decisions. Planners may consult the WAB with respect to a particular development application; the general public may raise concerns over local issues.

Independently-organised community or interest groups are increasingly prominent. Their potential impact is great. As an example, the Williams Lake Conservation Company (WLCC) increased awareness in their community about a development proposal, provided community members with necessary information (for example scientific reports and policy information), and encouraged people to become involved in public hearings. Their presence in the community, combined with the efforts of several other active groups, ensured an impressive turnout at a recent public meeting. However, the council voted 2:1 in favour of the proposed rezoning (on March 3, 2003); this indicates that concerted efforts of such community groups does not always lead to a desired outcome. Despite this, the group is committed to being involved: “we intend to do whatever we can to insure that in the future, community input in the planning process is recognised as significant and essential, not ignored” (von Maltzahn 2003). The WLCC is planning to appeal the decision to the NSUARB.
Information AWARENESS:

Many opportunities exist to raise awareness of planning projects in the HRM. One example is found in the Halifax and Dartmouth ferry terminals. A plan for a waterfront walkway in Dartmouth is underway, and informative posters are located in the waiting areas where people have a chance to read them. It contains visual and written information about the proposed plan, as well as contact information and a website. Such posters and panels are an effective way of providing information to the public on current projects. Choosing a venue like this allows people to use idle time waiting for the ferry to become informed about planning issues and projects.

The School of Planning at Dalhousie University encourages public awareness and engagement annually through its spring module, a public conference held each March. With topics varying from the inaugural conference, “Which way should Metro grow?” to the most recent “Breaking Ground: greening the urban and regional landscape”, these conferences provide the opportunity for the public to become involved in planning discussions. The format includes keynote lectures, workshops and design charrettes, all of which encourage dialogue and debate over pertinent planning issues. The event is open to the public and free of charge; the conference is generally well-attended, however improved promotion may elicit broader-based participation. Conference proceedings are published.
3.3 Conducting an information needs assessment

3.3.1 Overview of methodology

Methodology literature suggests using multiple approaches in determining needs, including surveys, interviews, observation and case studies (Witkin and Altschuld 1995, Farris 1996, and Grayson 2002). Program development is guided by formulating a mission, goals and desired outcomes, thus focusing on the ends to be attained rather than the means.

An information needs assessment (INA) is predicated on the assumption that a certain population has needs that are not being met adequately (Witkin and Altschuld 1995). Sometimes participants understand and can articulate their needs (often confused with demands); needs that people are unaware of are termed latent. A needs assessment endeavours to reveal both recognised and latent needs (Grayson 2002). In order to be effective, such a study must encourage participation by a broad cross-section of the population.

An INA can be a particularly valuable tool for determining priorities and making decisions about program development. Such priorities are based upon identified needs (Witkin and Altschuld 1995). In this thesis, an INA was conducted to understand the current and desired situations regarding the availability of planning information in the HRM.
3.3.2 Questionnaire design

Based on the hypothesis that information needs of planning process participants in the HRM are not being met, and that an INA can provide insight into how to address these needs, a questionnaire was developed. Methodology literature (Witkin and Altschuld 1995, Farris 1996, and Grayson 2002) and discussions with colleagues enabled identification of the target population. The questionnaire was developed to survey a wide variety of participants about current information use, sources of information consulted, and difficulties experienced in obtaining desired information. Participants were also asked about services or information which they would like to see provided (“desired situation”) in order to inform program development.

The intent of the questionnaire was to elicit opinions and perspectives of current users of planning information (participants in planning processes). The survey was developed based on literature, current information sources, and conversations with faculty and planners. It comprises three sections, with a mixture of closed and open questions designed to provide a range of quantitative and qualitative responses. The questionnaire focuses on three main issues:

1. Function and interest of participants in planning processes;
2. Information needs: current use, types of information sought, and difficulties with respect to access;
3. Value of information and desired state of service provision.

The language and context of the survey was designed for respondents who are currently involved in planning processes in some capacity. As it is likely that people at public
meetings have an interest in planning (thus meeting the condition of “participant”), respondents were recruited at these venues. Planning students and faculty were approached at the School of Planning, and real estate agents were recruited separately, as both these groups are not always represented at public meetings. They were included in the sample population because of their potential influence over planning decisions; as well, in improving service and information provision in the HRM, they were identified as groups which should be included in the process and could benefit from alternate participation opportunities. Planning students, in particular, have a duty to apply their knowledge to challenge the status quo. Real estate agents have the power to influence and market new urban concepts. Discerning needs of existing and potential participants in the planning process is a proactive means of engaging these people in future discussions.

In this study, a representative sample of participants was surveyed at six public information meetings and public hearings during January and one in February 2003. In some cases, presentations were made at community council meetings to explain the nature of the research, its implications, and to solicit participants for the survey. Each volunteer participant was given a consent form explaining the nature of the study and any ethical implications, and was given the opportunity to consult with the researcher to answer any questions. Many people completed questionnaires (see Appendix A for research instruments) immediately at the meetings, which ensured a positive rate of return. Others who did not have the time to complete the ten-minute survey were offered envelopes and postage to return the surveys to the researcher. The overall response rate for surveys distributed was 66.2%. Methodology literature suggests a thirty percent response rate as significant (Grayson 2002).
3.3.3 Definitions and sampling strategy

“Participants” in the planning process include anyone who may have a stake or role in the future of the community and decisions being made which affect quality of life. These people include concerned citizens, members of interest groups, councillors, planners, other professionals, developers, real estate agents, professors and students. Sampling of participants occurred primarily at public meetings and hearings, and a representative population was approached. For the purposes of this investigation, only the urban core of the HRM was considered (see Figure 3.1 for a map of the urban core of HRM).

Figure 3.1. The HRM’s urban core (Source: Adapted from HRM 2002).

By examining regional and community council meeting minutes (for meetings with public hearings) for the past year, average proportions of the various types of participants were determined. The category with the greatest variation was public participants. This can be in part attributed to the degrees of interest in particular issues, represented by the turnout
at meetings. A viable sample should include 1-10% of the population (in this case, total participants in the planning process), so depending on the turnout at public meetings, this total participant population can range from a low estimate of 150 to a high over 400 (as seen at the Chebucto Community Council Public Hearing on February 3, 2003). Thus, 15-40 survey respondents would represent 10% of the target sample population. Including the local academic population (students and faculty who should be more involved in advancing planning ideas) the following distribution was determined:

**Table 3.1.** Estimated relative proportions of participants in the planning process in the HRM.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant type</th>
<th>Representative percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public participant / concerned citizen</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member / leader of an interest group</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Councillor</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planner</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other professional (architect, engineer)</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developer</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real estate agent / broker</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor / academic</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Planning process” is defined as the diverse processes that involve land use decision-making and information exchange. These include plan amendments (such as rezoning), development applications and development agreements, plan or policy review (or
creation), and regional planning. This may also be extended to include advisory committees, *ad hoc* planning groups and community organisations. Planning processes ideally include educational and informative functions as well.

“Need” is defined as the discrepancy or gap between a present state and a desired end state (Witkin and Altschuld 1995). This can alternately be explained as the difference between “what is” and “what should be”. In this study specifically, needs for information and service provision are the focus. Certain needs are extrapolated from comments and conversations since articulated deficiencies may not represent all possible needs of the broader population.

3.3.4 Limitations and scope of the study

This study discerns information needs of people involved in planning processes in the HRM. It is based on the assumption that people need information in order to be involved in planning, and that needs are currently not being met adequately. The methodology presumes that an INA will be a useful tool in determining gaps between current and desired states. The study does not attempt to predict quantifiable impacts of information use on decision-making. The sample population is limited to players in planning discussions and decisions, including councillors, planners, publics, educators, students, developers and others. It does not purport to represent actual needs of the nonparticipants in society, although an attempt is made to extrapolate the data to inform program development for the entire population.
3.3.5 Potential biases

Most of the sampling for this study occurred at public meetings and hearings. People who attend public meetings are somewhat informed (or at least informed enough to know about the meeting in the first place). Thus it is expected that this target population may be more adept at obtaining planning information. In many cases, organised community groups have determined how to gain access to the resources they need. In other cases, participants appear at meetings seeking information. It can be expected, then, that if this relatively well-informed group of individuals experiences any problems retrieving information, the less-informed members of the community would experience equal or increased difficulty regarding access to information.

3.4 Presentation of survey results

During a five week period in January and February 2003, 71 surveys were distributed; 47 completed surveys were returned, yielding a 66.20% response rate. The qualitative sections of the survey proved successful as 36 respondents (76.60%) made comments. Forty-five respondents (95.75%) supplied contact details, indicating interest in the development of solutions to address information needs. In general, respondents came from within the urban core of the HRM (see Figure 3.1).

3.4.1 Respondent distribution

The distribution of respondent functions closely matched the anticipated distribution of the total population of planning participants in the HRM (see Table 3.1 for estimated proportions). Table 3.2 (below) indicates the actual distribution achieved from the 47
completed surveys (Question 1 - Appendix A), as well as the deviation from the estimated proportions.

Table 3.2. Actual proportions of survey respondents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant type</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Expected percentage (Table 3.1)</th>
<th>Percent deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public participant / concerned citizen</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>29.79%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>+ 1.79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member / leader of an interest group</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10.63%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>+3.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Councillor</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10.63%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>-5.37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planner</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.26%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>-3.74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other professional</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.13%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>-0.87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developer</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.26%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>+0.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real estate agent / broker</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.26%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>+2.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor / academic</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8.51%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>+4.51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21.28%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>-2.72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.26%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>+0.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>100.01%*</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>+0.01%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Not 100.00% due to rounding.

The actual distribution of respondent types closely mirrors the estimated proportions. The under-representation of councillors, planners and students does not skew the results since these groups are generally well-connected and express the least amount of difficulty in obtaining information. Conversely, if these three groups were over-sampled, the INA would have revealed little need for improving access to planning information. Public participants and members of interest groups represent the greatest percentage (40.42%) of survey respondents; both categories primarily comprise members of the general public. The proportion of interest group members, public participants, academics and real estate
agents was higher than expected; these participants contributed twenty-one suggestions on improvements to services (58.33%). Students are the second largest group of respondents, which reflects the high student density in the HRM. Just under one-third of survey participants came from academia (students and faculty), indicating a willingness to share ideas about improving information provision in the HRM. Overall, the distribution of respondents resembles the anticipated proportions, thus generating accurate results and trends. The respondents can be broadly categorised into three groups: general public (public participants and interest groups - 40.42%), municipal staff / development sector (planners, councillors and developers - 29.79%) and academics (students and faculty - 29.79%).

Respondents were asked to specify their interest or reason for being involved in the planning process (Question 2 - see Appendix A). The greatest area of interest was the environment (32.73%), with professional affiliation coming in second (23.64%). Others were engaged in the name of public participation (10.64%). A significant proportion (7.27%) indicated reasons other than the ones provided in the list of options. These included genuine interest in the planning process and practice, a commitment to making the HRM more “people friendly”, and academic reasons. Three respondents were interested in each of the following areas: legislation and policy, local government, private sector and development (each 5.45% of responses). Two people were involved on the administrative side of the planning process.

\footnote{The \textit{total post-secondary student population of the HRM is 28 435 as of October 2002 (McCarthy 2003).}}
3.4.2 Information issues: frequency of use and difficulty

Respondents were asked how frequently they used certain types of planning information (Questions 5 - Appendix A). Their responses were sorted using a weighted frequency index (WFI) to determine the relative frequencies of use (Frequency of Use Index - FUI) amongst the various information types. This approach was also used to determine frequency of difficulty (Frequency of Difficulty Index - FDI) in obtaining the same types of information (Question 7 - Appendix A). This type of index is used in similar studies (e.g. Bens 2001, Hacklay 2002)

The FUI represents a measurement of frequency of use or access to a particular type of information. The WFI values fall between 0 and 6, where 0 denotes that a particular source is never used (or never difficult to obtain), and 6 indicates daily access (or daily difficulty in access). The number of responses for each frequency of use category were counted (out of a possible 47). So, the FUI is calculated as the sum of weighted responses:

\[
\text{FUI} = \frac{(\text{daily} \times 6) + (2-4 \text{ times per week} \times 5) + (2-4 \text{ times per month} \times 4) + (\text{monthly} \times 3) + (2-6 \text{ times per year} \times 2) + (\text{yearly or less} \times 1)}{N}
\]

divided by N (total responses). “Never” and “not applicable” were given a score of zero. Table 3.3 shows FUI and FDI values for each type of information. The top five scores in
each are highlighted (note: there are six for use because of a tie). For FUI, most indices fall in a range between 2 (used 2-6 times per year) and 4 (used 2-4 times per month); this supports monthly access for most types of information. As for difficulty, the FDI range hovers around 1, indicating that difficulty in obtaining most types of information occurred yearly or less. These values were no doubt influenced by those groups which have little or no difficulty in retrieving information (planners, councillors, and developers).

Table 3.3. Frequency indices for use (FUI) of information and difficulty (FDI) of access. (rank appears in brackets for the top values)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information type</th>
<th>FUI</th>
<th>FDI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Municipal planning strategy (MPS)</td>
<td>2.87 (4)</td>
<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development plans</td>
<td>2.89 (3)</td>
<td>1.13 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subdivision plans</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>1.13 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maps</td>
<td>3.74 (1)</td>
<td>1.17 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legislation / bylaws</td>
<td>3.09 (2)</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standards / guidelines</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background reports (environment, site, etc.)</td>
<td>2.83 (5)</td>
<td>1.32 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff reports</td>
<td>2.83 (5)</td>
<td>1.00 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development applications</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manuals</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budget information / public works plans</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedural information</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall weighted index for all types</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is interesting to note that, with the exception of the MPS, the most sought after types of information also have the highest degree of difficulty in obtaining them. The most frequently used types of information are maps (3.74), legislation (3.09), development plans (2.89), municipal planning strategy (2.87), and, tied for fifth place, background and staff reports (2.83). Maps are frequently sought after because they have numerous implications in land use planning and are necessary to understand the lay of the land. The second most used type of information, legislation, is a critical piece in understanding how decisions can be made regarding planning matters. These figures suggest that participants use these types of information most frequently, usually monthly (maps are consulted bimonthly). This coincides with the regular monthly frequency of public meetings. The overall FUI for all information types was 2.69, indicating close to monthly access of all information types. This points out a need to provide various information types on a consistent basis.

The degree of difficulty expressed by respondents was slightly lower than anticipated. This could be in part because the survey respondents are already actively involved in planning processes, and thus know how to find the information they need. Background reports posed the most difficulty (1.32), while budget information had the least amount of difficulty (0.64) associated with it, not surprising since over one quarter of respondents (27.66%) never use this type of information. Each type had some level of difficulty associated with finding or obtaining it; the degree of difficulty was generally proportional to the frequency each type of information was sought. For some information, like the MPS, it is expected that one would only experience difficulty finding it once, and then may procure their own copy. This can in part account for relatively low
rate of difficulty in finding certain types of information. However, it is significant that the overall FDI for all sources is 0.97, representing at least yearly difficulty in obtaining information.

Over three quarters of respondents (76.60%) elaborated on the most difficult type of information to obtain (Question 8 - Appendix A). The 36 respondents who included comments yielded 43 responses. Table 3.4 lists the types of information that were most difficult to obtain and why, as well as the number of responses in each case. The categories of information can be broadly grouped into background studies, municipal documents, maps and legislation. Two respondents (5.55%) expressed no difficulty. Another received information from a reliable community group leader and thus did not seek information independently.
Table 3.4. Difficulties expressed in retrieving certain types of information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of information</th>
<th>Issues / concerns</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Background studies: scientific reports, water quality / testing, environment and traffic studies | - hard to locate  
- no mechanism to store or distribute water quality reports  
- lack of commitment to enforce environmental requirements  
- lack of cooperation of traffic planners | 15 (34.88%) |
| Municipal documents: development plans, development agreements, staff reports, procedural | - not sure where to look for information  
- staff reports should be online, and at public libraries  
- developers reluctant to disclose intentions to public scrutiny | 8 (18.60%) |
| Maps | - lack of readily available and reliable information  
- print maps in notices so public has information they need  
- need for planning office to be closer to map office | 4 (9.30%) |
| Legislation: MPS, MGA, bylaws | - MPS should be online (with all public information)  
- MPS: hard to obtain a copy from municipality  
- hard to find non HRM legislation | 4 (9.30%) |

Environmental reports and water quality studies were seen as important by many participants, and they were concerned that this information should be publicly available. This expression of interest is not surprising given that 18 out of the 47 survey respondents (32.73%) were most interested in participating in planning out of concern for the environment. As well, several respondents felt improved access to environmental and water quality reports would encourage better enforcement (many of these responses came from the WAB).
The remaining responses included literature, due to the high cost of obtaining personal copies. Residential market reports were cited by one respondent as expensive for an individual to order, however this type of information is used primarily by real estate agents. A common complaint was that information is often out of date and it is hard to locate the most recent studies and reports. Conversely, respondents noted a lack of complete historical information in the region. Several respondents indicated that municipal information takes the longest to obtain. One public participant expressed extreme difficulty with most types of information, indicating it is very hard for an individual to track down the right people and information. Some felt information was being withheld by developers because they did not want to be accountable, particularly for environmental reports and water quality results. Two respondents indicated that awareness is an important issue, as it is difficult to obtain information when you do not know what to ask for. Improved awareness of planning issues will come from better promotion of projects, reports, studies and applications. This increased awareness will likely also increase the need and demand for more publicly available information.

Not surprisingly, planners and councillors encountered the least amount of difficulty obtaining the information they require. This is due in part to their roles as information brokers, and also that much of the information they need is provided to them without having to look for it, or produced in their offices. Concerned citizens, members of the public and interest group participants (i.e. the general public) expressed the most difficulty (see Section 3.4.5 for specific discussion of this group). One respondent recognised the potential for information overload, due to the amount of available information increasing, and time to absorb and process it staying the same. The main
problems encountered had to do with cost, a lack of scientific studies and interpretation, as well as latent power issues.

Only two respondents noted that there were other categories of information they used that were missing from the list on the survey. In hindsight, the School of Planning should have been included as a potential source of information. None of the respondents, however, suggested they used it as a source of information.

### 3.4.3 Sources of information

Since respondents were recruited at public meetings, it was assumed that they indeed are active information seekers. In order to ascertain current information sources, participants were asked to specify their single most important source for planning information (Question 3 - Appendix A). Many people indicated more than one response, showing the need to consult several sources. The municipal planning office (28.07%) and staff reports (17.54%) were the most common single sources. The next most popular responses were colleagues (15.79%) and the Internet (14.04%).

To understand patterns of information use, participants were asked “how do you typically obtain the following types of information?” and to check all that applied (Question 6 - Appendix A). Most respondents used numerous sources to track down the planning information they needed. In fact, all but three respondents (who consulted only the municipal planning office) sought information from a variety of sources. The average number of sources used to obtain information was 4.28, reinforcing the necessity to consult more than one source to obtain the information they needed. Multiple sources
may increase the chance of obtaining accurate, unbiased information. Background reports (10.48%) and maps (9.76%) were retrieved more often than other types of information. The following sources were most commonly used (see Table 3.5 below).

**Table 3.5. Sources of information (multiple choice selection, percentage calculated for n)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Source of Information</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Municipal planning office</td>
<td>37.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Municipal staff reports</td>
<td>16.31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>12.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Colleague</td>
<td>7.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Other (personal copy, provincial dept., community group leader, watershed advisory board, land information office (LIO) for maps)</td>
<td>6.31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Academic library</td>
<td>5.48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Newspaper</td>
<td>3.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Public library</td>
<td>3.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Professional body (API, CIP, etc.)</td>
<td>2.98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Consultant</td>
<td>2.86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11*</td>
<td>TV / radio</td>
<td>0.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11*</td>
<td>Personal journal subscription</td>
<td>0.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* = tie</td>
<td></td>
<td>n = 840</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As indicated by the above table (Table 3.5), the municipal planning office, staff reports, and the Internet are used most often to obtain planning information. This is probably because these are the only sources of diverse planning information. The types of information most commonly sought from the municipal planning office (see Question 6 - Appendix A) include the municipal planning strategy (9.80%), maps (9.49%), and development applications (9.18%). Staff reports are used most often as sources for
background reports (10.95%), standards, development applications and subdivision plans (each at 9.49%). The Internet, on the other hand, is used most often to retrieve legislation (18.10%), standards (13.33%) and maps (12.38%). Colleagues (7.26%) and other sources (6.31%) were also used to find information. Beyond consulting the planning office and Internet, respondents sought personal contacts to retrieve needed information and advice.

An interesting part of this study is the perceived barriers and obstacles between participants and information. The information search and gathering process was seen as costly by some respondents, in terms of direct costs and time. As well, certain information sources are not as easy to use and are therefore less popular. It appears that the more time and effort required to track down a specific piece of information, the less likely the average participant will pursue it.

3.4.4 Value of information and the desired situation

The last section of the survey focused on the value of ready access to information, measured as the amount of time saved per week (Question 9 - Appendix A); on average, however, respondents use planning information on a monthly basis (See Table 3.3). Only 10.64% of respondents said they would not save any time, and that the information they needed was always available. These responses came from planners and professionals, along with two members of the public. An overwhelming 70.21% would save up to four hours per week. The remainder (19.15%) valued improved access to information significantly, saving from four to more than eight hours per week. This section reveals that almost 90% of respondents would benefit from having the information they need more readily accessible. Time savings are important in encouraging new people to become
involved in planning discussions. People cite being too busy as a common excuse for not participating in a variety of activities.

As well, the last section of the survey included two open questions. The first focused on products, services and information respondents felt should be provided to improve their productivity or ability to participate (Question 10 - Appendix A). Thirty-six people (76.60%) included suggestions. The last question allowed respondents to make any other comments regarding access to planning information (Question 11 - Appendix A). Twenty-four participants (51.06%) included additional comments at the end of the survey, indicating interest in better service provision.

Over three quarters of respondents (76.60%) included suggestions for products and services that could be provided (or improved) to enable more informed participation or increase productivity. The 36 respondents yielded 41 suggestions. These can be broadly grouped into Internet, awareness / education and central sources for information. There is some overlap between the categories which can be explained as a need for improved awareness and ease in finding information.
Table 3.6. Services and products to make participation more effective and informed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Services / products / ideas</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>- information clearinghouse, sorted by topic</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>(34.15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- post planning reports, zoning, land use policies, minutes of public hearings, land registry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>information, staff reports</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- all public information should be available online</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- potential to save time and money</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness / education</td>
<td>- mail outs</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>(31.71%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- referrals from friends, neighbours, staff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- public education about legal requirements, planning process</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- advisory boards: well-educated and experienced individuals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- guides and directories to know where to find information</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- interpretation of zoning descriptions, scientific reports</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central source for information</td>
<td>- storehouse of information, guides, digests, community group information, environmental reports</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>(24.39%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- staff familiarity with related / supporting documents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- GIS database for HRM and NS publicly accessible</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- complete development applications available</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Over half (51.06%) of the respondents included additional comments at the end of the survey (Questions 10 and 11 - Appendix A). The most common commentary (29.17%) related to the need for a central source for information and departments involved in planning. These suggestions imply that having all information available from one source would enable departments to collaborate and ensure that people can easily obtain information they need. With constant reorganisation of staff it can be difficult to find people and information; a central office or source with staff knowledgeable of where to obtain information is critical in improving the process. Other suggestions included compiling a guide or directory of available resources so that people would know where to look; this can be linked to a need for increased awareness of planning information.
Amalgamation of the HRM resulted in the loss of planning-related information and resources. As one respondent indicated:

“Halifax once had an excellent planning library, and then a planning information office. Now that seems to be all gone - a great loss. Municipal Affairs lost its libraries and its collection. It has become increasingly difficult to get any historical depth on planning issues in Halifax.”

This is an important facet of information provision, to house enough historical and contemporary documents to provide a complete, in-depth profile of planning issues in this region. One respondent lamented that the focus of the planning process has shifted from service and participation to efficiency, where long “open houses” replace more meaningful public meetings.

One in five participants (20.83%) was concerned about the lack of vision in planning in the HRM. Although regional planning is underway, a regional strategy is not currently in place to guide development and planning decisions. Two respondents felt that such a strategy needs to be in place before any more development decisions are made. Others were concerned with current “as-of-right” development, which allows developers to “ignore current knowledge on development strategies and environmental sensitivities”. This mode of development, it was suggested, can negate the good intentions of policies and guidelines. A broader vision would enable cumulative environmental impacts to be considered properly in planning matters.
Several people (12.50%) commented on the accessibility of the municipal planning strategy (MPS) and associated land use bylaws (LUB). These documents must be purchased from the municipality (for about $20) and are not available for consultation online. At least eighteen separate strategies currently exist in the HRM, since each district has maintained its pre-amalgamation policies and regulations. Community-specific plans have the ability to protect local assets or enact community-based policies; however, consistency between community plans can be achieved when a regional strategy is implemented. One respondent suggested that copies of the MPS and LUB be available for public reference at each municipal planning office. Another venue for these documents could be public library reference sections.

Other comments included a positive overall perception of planning staff (12.50%), indicating they were generally nice people who were helpful in providing information when asked. Two people indicated that information provision was generally quite good, and has improved greatly over the past twenty years. Others felt that the planning department (and other government departments) is very disorganised. One respondent indicated a need to hire more well-informed staff to provide information to the public, in a joint public service and public relations function. This indicates a need to improve the profile of planning staff and the profession in general, as another respondent indicated. They noted that most people in the HRM do not even know what planning is about.

The comments generally supported this research, and revealed areas for improvement in current information provision. One person indicated that the research was a very worthwhile endeavour. Another indicated that they had no personal difficulty obtaining
information as a councillor, but were interested in knowing how the public responded, and the solutions developed through this process. Comments such as these, as well as the response level for all questions, indicates general interest and support for investigating options for better information provision.

3.4.5 Participants with highest levels of difficulty: the general public

This section focuses on the group of respondents who expressed the greatest degree of difficulty in finding and obtaining information: the general public. A specific examination of this group’s needs is warranted for program development, as the public will likely benefit the most from any proposal to improve information services in the HRM. This group includes public participants, concerned citizens and members or leaders of interest groups (40.42% of survey respondents). About three-quarters of this grouping were public participants (73.68%); the remaining respondents (26.32%) were involved with different interest groups.

Not surprisingly, the general public is most interested in environmental aspects of planning (63.64%); this level of interest is double that of the entire survey population (32.73%). As well, the level of interest in planning for the sake of public participation (22.73%) was twice as high in this specific group than in the sample population (10.64%). This reflects the origins and demands for public participation as it relates to the environmental movement; also, environmental issues are of great public importance as degradation is often immediate and irreversible. These issues are highly publicised, controversial, and emotionally-charged.
There is a proportional relationship between the frequency information is used and the degree of difficulty experienced in retrieving it. In the total survey results, the average FUI was 2.69; for the general public, this figure is slightly lower (2.39), indicating that information is used several times per year (between 1 and 6 times annually). Using raw indices, the general public experienced difficulty yearly or less (0.87); this relates directly to the lesser FUI in this group. Relying solely on these figures leads to the conclusion that proportional degree of difficulty is similar to that of the total survey population. However, coupling this with comments (Question 8 - Appendix A) reveals the greater amount of difficulty experienced by the general public. Sixteen (of nineteen) respondents specified the types of information most difficult to obtain: primarily, environmental / background reports and the MPS. These two types of information can provide participants with the information they need to address council and staff as informed contributors. If background studies and policies are unavailable, or difficult to obtain, the general public cannot be expected to provide informed presentations at public meetings.

The most important sources for planning information were the municipal planning office and staff reports (each 22.73%) and colleagues or neighbours (18.18%). A more even distribution of sources was used by the general public than the entire survey population (See Table 3.7). This implies reliance on diverse sources, and relates to sporadic information seeking behaviour of the general public. The average number of sources consulted by each participant was 3.74. Correlating this with the top sources used by the general public (municipal planning office, staff reports, colleagues, TV/radio and public library), a need to expand the resources currently provided is advised. Three sources (academic library, consultant and professional body) were not used at all by the public.
Table 3.7  Most important sources of information for the general public.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Information</th>
<th>Rank (General Public)</th>
<th>General Public</th>
<th>Total Survey Population (Rank in brackets)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Municipal planning office</td>
<td>1*</td>
<td>22.73%</td>
<td>28.07% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff reports</td>
<td>1*</td>
<td>22.73%</td>
<td>17.54% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleague(s)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18.18%</td>
<td>15.79% (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV / radio</td>
<td>4*</td>
<td>9.09%</td>
<td>3.51% (7*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Library</td>
<td>4*</td>
<td>9.09%</td>
<td>3.51% (7*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>6*</td>
<td>4.55%</td>
<td>14.04% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>6*</td>
<td>4.55%</td>
<td>5.26% (5*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal subscription</td>
<td>6*</td>
<td>4.55%</td>
<td>3.51% (7*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (WAB minutes)</td>
<td>6*</td>
<td>4.55%</td>
<td>5.26% (5*)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* indicates a tie

As well, sources which were not consulted significantly by the total sample population, such as TV/radio and the public library, made up one-fifth of the general public’s sources. This indicates a preference for easily accessible information, whether it comes from colleagues, popular media or the local library (these accounted for 36.36% of information collected by the public). These sources reside in the community, and dedicate greater coverage to local issues. While the municipality supplies nearly half of the information sought (45.46%), there is some resistance to using government sources indicated by the high use of informal mechanisms. The Internet figured less prominently amongst the general public, due in part to the more senior demographic makeup of this group within the survey population.
The general public group reflects the trend of the entire population with respect to need for planning information (Question 4 - Appendix A). While planners and councillors use information more regularly, the public need planning information at least monthly (57.90%), even several times per month (31.58%). This suggests that a proposal to address information needs would have to respond to average or regular information seeking, providing consistently available services.

The general public in this survey, however, may not represent accurately the expected profile of the average member of the public. Those surveyed were already involved in planning processes in some respect, and thus familiar enough with the field to be aware of public meetings. Several people in this group were active in interest groups as well. It is anticipated that the broader public, those who are not currently involved in the planning process, would be less aware of planning issues and encounter more difficulty finding the information they need. These non-participants should be considered in any proposal aiming to increase awareness of planning issues and effectiveness of public processes.

3.5 Discussion: how to interpret and address information needs

3.5.1 What are the information needs?

This study has shown that planning information needs relate mainly to respondents’ weekly activities (44.68% are average/regular users of information), while 31.91% were sporadic users (needing information to start new projects or respond to specific inquiries). Daily users of information (who have a “frequent and intense” need for information) represented 23.40% of respondents (Question 4 - Appendix A).
Over half of survey respondents (53.93%) use the municipal planning office and staff reports as their main information sources, suggesting that people prefer to receive processed information rather than raw data or uninterpreted policies and legislation. The favouring of municipal information sources suggests two things: the public trust the information the municipality provides, and there is nowhere else to go for the types of planning information they need. Since the municipality provides over half of the planning-related information sought, the infrastructure exists and can be improved and extended. However, providing people with information that does not come solely from the HRM has many benefits, including exposure to different points of view and fostering critical thought. The fact that most respondents consult multiple sources for information may indicate that either they are vigilant in seeking out balanced viewpoints, or that there is no one central source for all the required information. The latter is a more reasonable assumption, given the nature of survey responses.

3.5.2 What are current sources of planning information?

People tend to seek planning information from where the city planners are. The municipal planning office is by far the most common source of information (37.62%). Combined with municipal staff reports, the HRM provides 53.93% of planning information. Since amalgamation the HRM has retained three planning and development offices in Dartmouth, Sackville, and Halifax. People can figure out where to go for specific development inquiries (i.e. if a proposal is in Dartmouth, that planning office would be consulted). It is more difficult to determine where to go for general planning information. Since individual planners move around considerably within the municipality, informal networks that have assisted in obtaining information may mutate or vanish.
The lesser importance of TV and radio as information sources can be attributed to a lack of coverage of planning issues; the general public, however, consult these sources more frequently because they are easily accessible. Journals proved to be the least popular source in this study (likely due to high costs), and technical or professional expertise required to comprehend the articles. Professional bodies (like the API and CIP) were not well-used resources, due to lack of awareness, as well as the fact these bodies do not focus information provision on local issues. They are of limited use for a general public participant concerned with what is happening in their immediate neighbourhood. The public library is another underused source (3.10%), due to a perceived lack of planning-related information. A considerable amount of planning-related information exists in these sources, including reference copies of MPSs and LUBs, yet collections are not promoted effectively to increase awareness. Consultants are not used extensively due to the expense associated in hiring one. Only powerful groups have the resources available to hire consultants to gather and analyse information for them (Baum 1999).

A key finding of this survey is that multiple sources of information are used. The only source used in solitude was the municipal planning office. For other inquiries, many sources were used to complement and support primary sources. The Internet is increasingly exploited to find and obtain information. Respondents expressed concern with the lack of available information on the HRM planning web site. On the other hand, literature suggests people distrust the reliability of information retrieved from the World Wide Web because anyone can post a site (Hacklay 2002). What is needed, then, is a central source for planning information, coupled with improved web resources and resourceful staff.
3.5.3 Why is planning information needed?

Currently, people seek planning information when it is related to an immediate activity or proposal. People want to be able to obtain information quickly and reliably in order to respond adequately to such issues. Broad spectrum media (such as TV, radio and newspapers) can increase general awareness of planning issues. There is also a need for complementary information systems to provide detailed information about specific issues or topics. A proposal to address needs will have to include both functions, providing a flexible system without attempting to devise “one size fits all” solutions. The survey has shown that even within a specific category of participant, there is great diversity in the types of information sought and sources consulted. This indicates a great degree of personal preference for certain methods of seeking information, or becoming involved. Any solution must offer opportunities for people to exert individual preferences in information seeking habits.

Ideally, planning issues will become commonplace dinner table discussion topics. Increased awareness of planning by a broader spectrum of the population would lead to a more involved society. Planning information will foster this awareness and excitement about planning projects, issues and potential.

3.5.4 Connection to literature

The public participation movement represents an increasing demand from the public for more access to information and better opportunities to be heard in a democracy. People want greater freedom of information and objective analysis. Although many people turn to the municipality for information, providing accurate unbiased information outside of
the municipal setting and political meetings may improve perceptions of planning in the HRM. Complementary to the information provided by the HRM (for example, staff reports which make planners accountable for their interpretations), independent reports and advice are frequently sought after by interest groups and the general public.

Planners usually possess the necessary interpersonal and problem solving skills to serve as “information workers” (Muir 1998), and are thus ideally suited to provide interpretation services to the public. Planners can have significant influence by taking the information they have and converting it into knowledge and power - using the ability to posses, understand and process information effectively. Planners have the unique opportunity take a leadership role in cultivating communicative planning. Considering the principles revealed (Section 2.5), and local information seeking behaviour, solutions can be developed. Inspiration for implementation is provided in the following chapter.
CHAPTER FOUR

Case Studies: What Halifax can learn from other parts of the world

4.1 Examples of what other cities do

One approach to increasing public awareness of and participation in the planning process is the creation of a planning information centre. The development of this centre will be guided by the literature related to information and participation (the *why* component), as well as the specific study of information needs in the HRM (the *what* component). These two components alone, however, do not undeniably support the idea of a planning information centre. This chapter provide concrete examples of *how* the HRM might provide the services needed, and shows *how* planning centres in other parts of the world address the criteria that have been discerned. Three successful examples of planning information centres are examined. A context for each city is provided to discern whether examples from overseas are applicable to the Halifax situation. Each centre is investigated in detail to determine what types of services and information they provide, the target audience, the *modus operandi*, and how each is reflected in the local perception of planning.

4.1.1 Amsterdam - De Zuiderkerk

Amsterdam is a city which has a tremendous interest in land use planning for several reasons, the primary one being the scarcity of land in The Netherlands. Lying at or below sea level, this marshy country has out of necessity created land by building canals and dykes. Thus any decisions made regarding land use are extremely calculated and precise.
The City of Amsterdam has a population of just over 730,000 (as of 2002); including the agglomeration of suburbs, the region has approximately one million inhabitants.

In 1988, the City Planning and Housing department took over the newly-renovated Zuiderkerk (the Southern Church) for a planning and housing information centre. Designed by the famous architect Hendrick de Keyser, this historic church was built in 1611; it lies in the heart of the old city. This museum-quality facility resides in a steel and glass structure constructed inside the old church, so as not to disturb the original building. The space is attractive and represents an integration of heritage building preservation with modern structures and uses. This symbolises the importance of design in planning in The Netherlands. The glass walls within the church become a metaphor for ‘transparency’ in planning, allowing visitors to look into planning offices from information facilities and displays. The entire undertaking “reflects how highly planning is regarded by the Dutch” (Torma 2002: 2).

![Two interior views of De Zuiderkerk](Source: De Zuiderkerk n.d.)
This public facility includes information on city projects relating to housing, urban renewal, transportation and the environment. A number of the city’s planning staff have offices here. De Zuiderkerk is geared for public and professional visits of all kinds, and is able to accommodate groups for lectures, presentations and site visits. When planning students travelled to Amsterdam in the fall of 2001, they were greeted and provided with a lecture on the history and future of planning in the city, followed by an informative guided tour of some new developments. This versatility provided an opportunity to understand a complex city planning history relatively quickly, to ask questions and to see current projects underway.

The centre promotes itself as having “all the answers under one roof” (De Zuiderkerk n.d.). De Zuiderkerk is represented in most major guidebooks and on tourist maps, emphasising the importance of planning issues to the Dutch. It treats planning “as a subject of general public interest” (Torma 2002: 2). The facility provides computer displays about planning (including English text for those not proficient in Dutch), as well as videos, leaflets and maps. A striking two-storey map of contemporary Amsterdam serves as a conversation stimulator and point of reference. Major planning efforts are displayed in impressive and inventive visual ways. The facility also offers many of its publications, as well as other materials about the city, for sale. It is open five days a week, and is free to the public. Guided tours of the church can be arranged for the negligible cost of 2 Euros (or about $3.25 CAD).

The fifteen year old centre provides information in a wide variety of media including graphic displays, videos, maps, publications, leaflets, computer programs and the
Internet. Regular exhibits on housing, urban regeneration and spatial development inform the public as well as curious tourists about current projects in the city. Anyone seeking to rent or buy housing is advised to consult the staff at De Zuiderkerk housing information centre. The centre also compiles information on various housing projects and programs in Amsterdam, serving as a public resource and inventory for housing information.

De Zuiderkerk’s web site is not terribly helpful to foreign information seekers since the main site is in Dutch (www.zuiderkerk.amsterdam.nl). The city planning department has a web site as well, but it also is in Dutch and difficult to navigate (www.dro.amsterdam.nl). The city site, however, does contain English content on a number of topics related to planning and housing in the city (www.amsterdam.nl). Essays on public housing, urban renewal, and how citizens can have a say in local government decisions are provided on this site.

4.1.2 Paris - Pavillon de l’Arsenal

The Pavillon de l’Arsenal is an incredible planning and architecture exhibition centre in the heart of historic Paris. Only steps from the Marais, the Bastille and the Seine, this planning centre is housed in a wonderful building designed in 1879 by architect Clément. The building’s second owner had a vision that the building would be used as an exhibition centre for the general public, and in 1988 the City of Paris made his vision a reality. The city bought the building, and after some renovations, created a three-storey planning and architecture exhibition centre.
This facility is the inspiration for this thesis. After visiting the Pavillon de l’Arsenal during the summer of 2002, I became enthralled with this centre and its prominence in the public realm. Entrance is free to the public, and the centre is open six days a week. A large scale model of the entire city lies in the centre of the ground floor, showing the fabric of the city dotted by monuments and cut by grand boulevards. The facility enables visitors to get a sense of the history and development of the city, as well as past and current renewal and urban design projects. The Pavillon de l’Arsenal “aims to help a broad public understand the evolution of Paris and its projects” (Pavillon de l’Arsenal n.d.).

![Figure 4.2](image)

**Figure 4.2** Interior views of the Pavillon de l’Arsenal, documentation centre and bookshop. (Source: Pavillon de l’Arsenal n.d.)

The city has an incredibly rich planning history - from Roman roots as Lutecia to its mid-nineteenth century rebuilding by Haussmann to François Mitterand’s “grands projets” - which is celebrated at the Pavillon de l’Arsenal. The permanent collection on the ground floor includes displays on various historical factors that shaped the city, as well as more recent projects and interventions. Several maps, drawings and scale models illustrate
historic and contemporary urban and architectural schemes. The second floor is home to three temporary exhibitions each year, ranging from the architecture of the city to parks and walkways to an investigation of the Paris underground. Each exhibit is documented and published by the Pavillon de l’Arsenal; most publications are available for purchase in the main floor bookshop.

As well as rotating exhibit space, the second floor is also home to the documentation centre (or library) and the ‘photothèque’, a repository of over 70,000 photos of Paris since 1940. The library is open to the public and houses over 3000 books, dossiers and urban planning schemes, as well as 120 planning periodicals. Other available resources include books on Paris, reviews, news clippings and documents to help revisit municipal decisions. While the library is open when the rest of the facility is open, the photothèque is accessible by appointment only, and reproductions of photographs are available for a fee.

Each year, the centre organises three themed temporary exhibitions, invites international participation in twenty architecture competitions, makes available travelling exhibitions, and hosts numerous conferences and symposia. There is also an opportunity for planning and architecture students to showcase their work on the third floor, and through various competitions. The director sees the facility as an “events forum” to focus on current problems or simply to stimulate discussion of urban and architectural issues. Video archives of all conferences are available at the centre; as well, the Pavillon de l’Arsenal publishes the proceedings of such events. The facility can be rented out for events, seminars and conferences as well. Their brochure indicates that about hundred guided
tours are given (Dalhousie planning students took a tour in fall 2002), and the centre sees over 100 000 visitors annually. Over 120 free conferences and seminars have been hosted by the Pavillon de l’Arsenal since 1989.

The bookstore is a wonderful repository of all sorts of publications, including the in-house conference proceedings. As well, there are hundreds of books on various topics relating to urban and architectural life in Paris. One inventive resource is a 2 disc CD-ROM with background planning studies and maps for all twenty arrondissements of the city, compiled by the planning department. The CD-ROM contains details for each neighbourhood, from density to demographics, from economics to environment.

The president of the Pavillon de l’Arsenal is the city’s director of planning. This demonstrates commitment on the part of the mayor and the city, who see this facility as an integral function of planning in Paris. The planning department’s map office is two doors down the street; this is an opportunity to share resources. However, a visit to the map office revealed that staff were not aware that a CD-ROM was available from the Pavillon de l’Arsenal containing information planning staff could benefit from having. This lesson is a reminder that communication is invaluable between (or within) departments so that resources can be effectively shared, and the work is not unnecessarily reproduced.

The Pavillon de l’Arsenal’s web site is quite aesthetically pleasing and easy to navigate. It has a complete English translation, and includes information on the centre, its resources, exhibits and services, as well as complete listings of publications and contact information
(www.pavillon-arsenal.com). All in all, the Pavillon de l’Arsenal is an impressive, state of the art facility with an immense quantity of quality information and exhibits on architecture and planning.

4.1.3 Nagoya - Nagoya Urban Institute

The Nagoya Urban Institute (NUI) recently moved to its new home, the 31-storey Kanayama Minami Building in the Naka Ward of the City of Nagoya, Japan. One of the four largest cities in Japan, Nagoya has a population over 2.15 million (as of 2001). This state of the art skyscraper also houses the Nagoya / Boston Museum of Fine Art and the Kanayama Grand Court Hotel. The building is consistent with the Japanese built environment of high density, modern edifices. The twelve year old NUI occupies four floors of the building.

Figure 4.3  Kanayama Minami Building, which houses the Nagoya Urban Institute. (Source: Chubu Weekly 1999).
By “serving as the city planning ‘think tank’ and information exchange base, the Nagoya Urban Institute aspires to create appealing city planning in Nagoya, at the same time aiming to make a contribution to city planning in the world today” (Chubu Weekly 1999). This goal is supported by research activities, information collection and distribution, as well as public exhibitions. The NUI is run as a non-profit organisation. Opportunities exist for community members to support the facility through annual memberships of 5000 Yen (or about $63 CAD - www.xe.com). The NUI is open to the public six days a week.

The facility is replete with visually-attractive displays about city planning and development. A large aerial photo is embedded in one floor, complete with magnifying devices which permit visitors to enlarge specific parts or projects in the city that interest them. The fourteenth floor includes an exhibition hall with historic data, focused on the rebuilding of Nagoya after the war. It includes walls brimming with wonderful displays, as well as magnificent views of the city from the 14th-storey windows (Grant 2003). The facility is also geared towards students and visitors, with interactive computer displays including information about diverse planning issues and even some games.

For the more research-minded, the NUI also houses a library on the twelfth floor. Opened in 1993, the library houses over 36 000 books and material relevant to planning, including 2000 foreign language books (80% of which are in English). Topics covered include: urban studies, urban planning, urban development, public works, landscaping, water, transportation, architecture, housing, environment, townscape, urban history, geography, economics, education, and culture. About 9 000 government and academic reports are also
stored here, including information relevant to specific projects, newsletters, videos and reports. The library is free to the public, however a one-time registration fee of 300 Yen (less than $4 CAD at current exchange rates) is required to borrow books.

The NUI does have a web site, but its English version is of limited use; it outlines the objectives of the institute, but unlike other planning sites, does not contain any useful planning-related information (www.nui.or.jp/english/outbody.htm). The original Japanese version of the site appears to include much more information.

4.1.4 Facilitating information exchange and citizen involvement

The three facilities discussed have provided inspiration for the creation of a planning centre in the HRM. Also, urban design centres are becoming more prevalent, particularly in the United States. They “enhance an appreciation of planning” (Torma 2002: 2), while also providing a service of design review for development projects. Examples include the Van Allen Institute in New York City, and the City Design / Seattle Design Commission. Each centre also serves an important outreach and education function. Urban design is something tangible, thus people can use it as a way of gaining an understanding of larger planning issues. Citizen planning academies in the United States provide resources for citizens to become more informed and influential in the planning process. Such programs are designed “to educate, inform and involve citizens in the community planning process” (Torma 2002: 5). Another way of informing people about planning issues, which is becoming more popular as access to computers is increased, is via web sites. International planning department web sites pay particular attention to aesthetics and layout, a reflection of the importance of a professional and intriguing image for planning. An
excellent example is the Helsinki Planning Department site, which is thoughtfully designed and replete with information (www.hel.fi/ksv/English/index.html).

4.2 Roles for organisations and departments

The examples explored in this chapter illustrate that a wide variety of departments and interests can be represented in a planning centre, and can benefit from their existence. Coordination between departments and facilities serves the mutual benefit of all involved in planning. The following organisations and departments are discussed to reveal the information sources and communication potential each can provide to citizens in the HRM.

4.2.1 School of Planning / School of Architecture

Students and faculty in the Faculty of Architecture and Planning at Dalhousie University produce site plans, community profiles, urban design creations and inventive building proposals. Considerable energy and results come from activities within the Schools. However, this energy is not often felt within the greater community of the HRM, due in part to lack of promotion and interaction between the transient student body and the community. While some projects do have an outward community focus, much of what is created in the building remains there. Several courses and conferences produce publications, which could be of tremendous use to the local population if they only knew of their existence. StudioEast, an annual compilation of planning and architecture student work, is published by TUNSpress. The Cities and Environment Unit (CEU) participates in a wide variety of research and projects, and many people do not know it exists.
Schools should promote interaction with the larger community, encouraging students to become involved in HRM initiatives and challenge the status quo. As future professionals, students have a responsibility to be active participants, as well as to facilitate the involvement of other community members.

4.2.2 Municipal Planning and Development Services

As the INA revealed (see Section 3.4), many people go to the municipal planning office to obtain planning information. Since this source is a perceived storehouse of useful information and knowledgeable staff, the resources from municipal planning and development services can contribute significantly to the centre. A complete inventory of all information available from the municipality will ensure that the new planning centre does not unnecessarily duplicate its efforts. Accurate directories and guides to planning information should be available to the public and staff to ensure that current information is publicised. As well, the Planning Centre may alleviate the burden of information provision from municipal planners, enabling them to focus on planning.

4.2.3 Municipal Government / Council

It is in the political and civic interest of the local government to support and promote good projects and developments in the HRM. It is likely that the municipal government would be highly supportive of creating a planning information centre as it will encourage citizen involvement and improve the image (and quality) of planning in the region. An important function of local government would be cooperation in founding a planning centre, and concerted efforts to promote it. There are already several mechanisms in place whereby councillors and municipal government staff communicate with the public.
(particularly in an attempt to respond to inquiries). Insuring generous and reliable referrals to the new planning information centre will boost awareness tremendously.

**4.2.4 Provincial Government**

The provincial government could affect local planning issues in the HRM through its regulatory powers, and consistent enforcement of policies. A requirement for informal public consultation on new development proposals could promote the use of the centre as an exhibition and discussion facility. Public review of all physical planning proposals would focus energy and attention on the need for display space and interaction. The provincial government also has the ability to promote the HRM planning information centre as a resource for all Nova Scotians, as well as creating links and partnerships with the other Atlantic provinces. The province would likely be called on to provide funding to support the creation of a planning centre. Since Halifax is the centre of economic activity for Atlantic Canada, it can fulfill a role of providing resources for the whole region. Promoting and retaining local talent may alleviate the “brain drain” that Atlantic Canada experiences (Canada25 2002).

**4.2.5 Development Industry**

The development industry could be a great source of energy and inspiration in the HRM. By sponsoring planning and architecture competitions, developers could cultivate local and international students and young professionals who would have the chance to contribute fresh and inventive ideas. As well, developers could use the Planning Centre as a forum for public debate on planned developments. If the community were involved (and informed) in the process of determining the scale and quality of development, proposals
would more likely reflect community vision. Creative alternatives could be tested in design and idea form first to see if they would be acceptable to the community at large. Developers often complain about restrictions which prohibit certain building types and materials. With open, pre-application discussion and competition, the development industry could work with the community, planners and local government to modify the rules to permit inventive developments. The rules that planning has created, namely development standards, have simply set minima and maxima, which limit creativity and encourage the developer to maximise their return (Klynstra 2002). More creative designs could result from an open dialogue.

4.3 Lessons to be learned

There is a need to create excitement about planning issues and opportunities in the HRM. One way of doing this is to celebrate local projects and examples of excellence in our communities (Linzey 2002). Tangible local examples give people something to relate to and be proud of. Open dialogue can facilitate the identification of valued aspects in the community, and help develop creative approaches to preserving or enhancing them.

People get excited when they see examples of good planning, and when they can get actively involved in the discussion. Opportunities for hands-on participation in community plan development often elicit inventive responses (Linzey 2002). Thoughtfully-designed graphic presentations impress viewers and inspire creativity. Attention to detail and presentation give planning projects credibility. Inspired and stimulating displays at the Planning Centre will excite and involve people.
The three examples discussed exist in different realms. In Paris, the Pavillon de l’Arsenal is an extension of the city planning department. In Amsterdam, De Zuiderkerk is run in partnership with the city, but exists independently. On the other extreme is the Nagoya Urban Institute in Japan, which is separate from municipal functions altogether, and run as a non-profit organisation. All exist in the public domain.

The model most suited to the HRM is the one provided in Paris; the municipality is already the primary source for planning information in Halifax, and thus has the resources and responsibility to improve current mechanisms of information exchange. It is realistic to presume that the HRM Planning and Development department could extend its services. Since funding is one of the main obstacles to the development of a Planning Centre in the HRM, it is more reasonable to extend and improve existing functions within the municipality than to duplicate efforts through completely independent service provision. In doing this, however, the Centre must be aware of the potential bias of information if the municipality is the only provider of information. The model of the Pavillon de l’Arsenal enables the planner to provide independent and open interpretation, rather than the current role which becomes co-opted by the desires of council or developers. Planners should not be used as tools, rather they should be “organisers of public attention” and “brokers of information” (Forester 1989: 20). As well, the Pavillon de l’Arsenal provides inspiration for a successful planning and architecture exhibition centre, creating a discussion forum for pertinent issues in the HRM.
5.1 Solution: a Planning Centre

The previous chapters have explored information needs, revealed criteria from planning literature, and provided inspiration from world examples. There are several possibilities to meet the objectives of this research (Section 1.2). The first option is to do nothing, viewing the current system as a delicate balance of private and public functions. Apathy and low participant turnouts in current processes may be used to justify the “do-nothing” option, since participants obviously do not care enough to turn out. Conversely, these symptoms can be seen as problems within the planning system; this research shares this opinion, that the system can be improved to encourage more meaningful involvement and awareness. Another option is to focus solely on Internet-based information provision and exchange, eliminating the need for CICs and reducing the number of staff. A more positive approach would be to recognise the potential to improve current participation mechanisms, and extend the services and resources that the HRM already provides. This section proposes the establishment of a planning information centre as the best solution to improving planning awareness and education in the HRM.

5.2 Basis for recommendations

5.2.1 Criteria: Perspectives from planning research

The literature supports the idea of a central information centre, including a regional or national research centre (Hadden 1981). The review (Chapter Two) reveals criteria for
effective participation, improved information communication and better planning. A clear lesson from the literature is that information cannot be provided without education and promotion. Information overload can be problematic, as can misunderstanding of technical and scientific reports if objective analyses are not available. Awareness of planning processes and opportunities for public input permit participants to use and present the information they have gathered in order to influence decision-making.

5.2.2 My research: Information needs assessment

The survey results indicate a need for improved awareness of and access to planning information in the HRM. The municipal planning office, staff reports, Internet and colleagues are currently the most frequently-consulted sources of information. The INA showed that all types of planning information are used by participants; most respondents used information sources at least monthly. Since information seeking behaviour is somewhat sporadic, a permanent information resource means that people can retrieve the information they need when responding to specific inquiries. The most frequently used types of information include legislation, maps, municipal planning strategies, development plans, background reports and staff reports. A recurring problem revealed from the survey is not knowing where to obtain certain information. Over half of survey respondents (58.54%) felt that a central information source and improved web site would ensure accessibility of planning information, while 31.71% acknowledged the need for increased awareness and education (Question 11 - Appendix A).

In any research, the non-participants have to be considered and accounted for. From the survey results, there is a need for outreach and education programs in order to increase
awareness of planning issues in the HRM. As councillor Dawn Sloane noted at her pre-Christmas public information meeting, “I want to see more consultation with the community first and foremost. Seventy-seven people out of 14,276 that live in the downtown. I think we need to hear from more” (Ganley 2003). Respondents lamented the lack of vision for planning in the HRM. Research and outreach functions would enable the HRM to take a position on the future of planning in the region.

5.2.3 Instruction and inspiration from abroad

The planning centres described all serve important functions in their respective cities (and countries). Housed in significant buildings, these centres create an energy and excitement around current and historical planning projects. Exhibits challenge ideas and celebrate planning. Their central presence commands attention and serves to increase awareness of planning in the city. In Paris, architecture of the city is also a focus. In Amsterdam, the facility is a storehouse for housing information as well as planning. In Nagoya, the facility acts as a ‘think tank’ for planning and redevelopment endeavours in the city.

According to Torma (2002), successful programs “assume that people are interested in planning and the historic development of the community and therefore teaching the public about these things is important.” The case studies show how information, exhibition and research centres function in other parts of the world. These examples provide extensive libraries, photographic and video resources for public research. Conferences and discussions stimulate inquiring minds, and promote planning awareness. Historical and contemporary projects are showcased. The Pavillon de l’Arsenal also focuses on publications, archiving exhibitions and recording conference proceedings. Resources in all
cases can be consulted at no charge. Publications about local planning issues can be purchased at each centre.

All three centres have a prominent location in their respective cities, in architecturally- or historically-significant buildings (a church, a warehouse and a skyscraper). They serve the local population, and function as centres for a broader audience including tourists, historians and planning researchers. They celebrate planning through high-quality visual displays, interpretive visits and conferences. Large displays (maps, aerial photos and models) are used to emphasise important elements of city planning, or to provide a broad context and common language to visitors. Historical and contemporary examples of planning projects are presented in visually-stimulating ways, enabling people from all over the world to gain a basic appreciation for planning in the city.

5.2.4 Bridging the gap: Proposing a Planning Centre

The theoretical perspectives and INA support the concept of a Planning Centre for the HRM. Principles and criteria for effective participation and information communication (Section 2.5) reveal considerations and approaches to be incorporated into any solution. A Planning Centre best fits the criteria and objectives of this research. Many positive services and processes exist in the HRM; however, there is a gap between this and the desired outcome of increased awareness and mutual understanding of planning issues. The Planning Centre bridges the gap between the current and desired states. Since information seeking behaviour of participants is sporadic or regular, a permanent centre means that people do not have to individually keep track of continually shifting departments and staff.
5.3 Discussion of the Planning Centre

**Mission statement:** The Planning Centre is the focal point for planning research, education and awareness in the HRM. It provides accurate information, objective analysis and education for all citizens. It is a public resource, a meeting facility and an exhibition centre.

**Goals:** The Planning Centre provides a broad range of information types, in a variety of media. Responses to inquiries are prompt and efficient. Knowledgeable staff connect participants in the planning process, including planners, citizens, interest groups, developers, councillors, students and academics. Energy and excitement guide planning projects and proposals because people are engaged in their development, modification and approval.

**Desired outcome:** People are excited about planning opportunities in the HRM. The role of the planning profession is demystified, developers have increased opportunities for community feedback, and people are active participants in dialogue leading to mutual learning and understanding.

5.3.1 What the Planning Centre does

This research has set the stage for creating a Planning Centre, and what needs it should address. A central information source enables broader access to and awareness of planning information. Increased awareness about planning fosters a curiosity to find more information and get involved in planning opportunities.
### Table 5.1  How the Planning Centre incorporates principles of effective participation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principles and criteria (Table 2.1)</th>
<th>Planning Centre response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Encourage participation based on issues of interest</td>
<td>Incorporates information on a wide variety of topics related and peripheral to planning issues to stimulate interest and discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Strive for proactive planning, with opportunities for earlier involvement</td>
<td>Community workshops, design charrettes and on-going discussions foster a proactive approach and enable concerns to be accurately discerned and incorporated into policy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Promote open, interactive discussions on general planning issues</td>
<td>Workshops and conferences are hosted on various cutting-edge issues. Conferences spark an interest in planning, create a dialogue, and devise inventive solutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Improve public perception of planning</td>
<td>A storefront resource centre with helpful staff, transparent processes, a vast array of information and events will create excitement about planning issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Focus on active engagement of participants</td>
<td>Diverse techniques and promotions will attract participants. Ideas developed through the Centre will be integrated as part of planning processes, showing participants their input is useful and valued.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Provide accurate, easily interpreted information to all participants</td>
<td>The facility is a storehouse of information, guides, manuals and extensive contact lists. Internet kiosks, GIS resources and knowledgeable staff facilitate diverse methods of information comprehension.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Recognise and deconstruct power structures</td>
<td>The intent of the Centre is not to control information, rather provide ready access to multiple types. Full-time staff create contacts and directories to enable people to obtain the information they require without having to deal with powerful groups that may withhold information from individuals.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Principles and criteria (cont’d)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Planning Centre Response (cont’d)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>8. Find an appropriate venue for information exchange</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>It is the venue for information exchange, dialogue and discussion. The coffee shop promotes informal conversations, while formal programs and workshops encourage other modes of communication.</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **9. Involve a broader spectrum of the population** |
| **by increasing awareness and presence of planning in the city, people will be encouraged to seek out information and opportunities to become involved. Outreach will attract groups which may not otherwise be aware of or involved in planning processes.** |

| **10. Promote two-way information and idea exchange** |
| **Visually-stimulating exhibits foster impromptu dialogue. As well, friendly knowledgeable staff create an environment conducive to discussion. Opportunities for input and involvement are as important as the provision of information.** |

| **11. Provide a wide variety of processes** |
| **Outreach functions, including informative workshops and publications, inform citizens on how to present ideas to council, to prepare coherent presentations, to facilitate potential participation in existing processes. New approaches which are not currently practiced in the HRM will be explored.** |

| **12. Learn to value alternate forms of input and community dialogue** |
| **The Centre will actually promote these alternate forms, validating their use in planning practice. Run by planners, new techniques can be test-run and evaluated for usefulness in planning processes.** |

| **13. Effectively integrate new technologies to complement current approaches** |
| **Providing resources, staff and education, the centre will enable access to GIS and the Internet for the general public. An improved web site facilitates effective remote access.** |

| **14. Maximise opportunities to use new and diverse techniques** |
| **The Centre is the ideal locale to test and incorporate new technological approaches into current and new planning approaches.** |
The Planning Centre performs multiple functions above and beyond simply satisfying the principles and criteria discerned in this research. The centre maintains databases of existing research and community projects to enable participants to acquire context on communities, or to build on previous research. Printed resources, photographs and displays are catalogued and accessible to the public. Copies of the MPS, LUB, maps and plans are available. Opportunities for communication, interaction and exchange exist. Knowledgeable staff provide objective analysis and interpretation of technical reports.

Exhibitions and competitions create excitement and awareness about planning issues and projects. Students have an opportunity to showcase their work and ideas. Planners involve the public more actively in plan development and revision. Developers and architects present new and innovative designs to the public, and discern if they will be acceptable and marketable. The facility promotes new ways of looking at planning, urban design, housing and infrastructure. With exciting, eye-catching visual panels and presentations, the Centre is the basis for dialogue about community development and urban design.

In its most basic function, the Planning Centre is a meeting space. It can be used for discussions among individuals, or for cutting-edge conferences. A permanent presence in the HRM enables the Centre to foster on-going interest and excitement about planning. The Centre maintains partnerships with the municipality, planners, developers, academics, and politicians in order to provide efficient services. Connections with the departments and networks involved in planning allow staff to have current information and contacts, however the Centre retains autonomy to ensure that accurate, objective
information and advice are available. By making information accessible to the entire community, barriers are effectively removed.

The Centre provides internship opportunities for planning students. The benefits are two-fold: on one hand, the Centre benefits from the energy and research functions performed by the student interns. The future planners learn the human communication skills necessary to become effective planners. By responding to inquiries, conducting research, organising workshops and speaking with the public, budding planners contribute to the successful functioning of the Centre and become enthusiastic, well-rounded professionals.

**5.3.2 Obstacles to implementing a Planning Centre**

Despite the necessity to improve the perception of planning and participation opportunities in the HRM, this proposal is bound to encounter opposition. The main obstacle is the availability resources; this includes startup capital, an operating budget, staff and communications infrastructure. A great financial commitment is required to launch and maintain this centre. This will require cooperation of many different departments and agencies (some options are outlined in Section 4.2). Municipalities consistently feel the strain of budget cutbacks, and are expected to provide more services with fewer resources. The simplest and most cost-effective way to create this facility is by re-centralising parts of the HRM Planning and Development department, and increasing planners’ responsibilities in overseeing the development and operation of the Centre. The facility will include a coffee shop to help defray expenses and encourage informal dialogue about planning issues.
Short-term political agendas may also counteract the momentum of this idea. To ensure a successful, permanent facility in the HRM, a long-term must be made to improving awareness and participation opportunities. Another barrier may be lack of interest in the idea. Particularly in Atlantic Canada, people are resistant to change. New ideas require energy and effort to implement. This will require a commitment from the HRM, the province and staff to promoting the Planning Centre. The Centre will require the dedication of a core group of planners and faculty; ensuring consistency in staff members will preserve information networks and connections forged. The inertia of the status quo may pose difficulties in shifting the balance of power and services in the HRM, but it is necessary to create some excitement about planning locally.

5.4 Recommendations

The proposal for a Planning Centre in the HRM addresses the need to create awareness and excitement about planning issues. This research shows why it should be done, what it should do, and how it can meet the desired outcomes. The next step is action. It is timely to implement a Planning Centre, as regional plan development is imminent and the results will soon be revealed. The HRM is currently experiencing growth from offshore oil and gas exploration. Dalhousie University’s School of Planning is implementing a new undergraduate program in Community Design and strengthening the Master of Planning program. It is the ideal time to capture this energy and use it as a basis for future activity and engagement
5.4.1 Phase 1: Implementation

This research proposes a Planning Centre to address deficiencies in information and awareness. It does not develop a business plan for implementation, however there are some important steps to be taken. There is a need and potential to improve opportunities for involvement in planning in the HRM. In order to do this, short and long term goals must be established. In the short term, we have to show that improvements can be made. This includes maximising and promoting existing services, and creating a dialogue about the Planning Centre.

What can be done immediately is to determine what services can and should be provided and improved on the existing HRM planning and development web site. Ultimately, the Planning Centre will take this responsibility over. For now, we have to use existing staff and mechanisms to promote planning involvement opportunities and general awareness. Taking small steps and promoting conferences will enable partnerships to be forged, funding options to be investigated, and a venue to be acquired. It is sometimes difficult to get new facilities up and running because of a need to prove to potential investors or funding agencies that it will work. This research represents an important first step in establishing the context and need for a Planning Centre. A memorable line from the movie Field of Dreams seems appropriate in this discussion: “If you build it, they will come.”

5.4.2 Phase 2: Education, training and promotion

Once a location is established and funding obtained, the next step will be recruiting and training appropriate staff. The Centre will be directed by a planner. Planning students would be ideal interns, capturing energy and providing valuable learning opportunities.
Any new facility will have to be effectively promoted to be successful. Some mechanisms will be available through partnerships created to retrieve information and maintain contacts. The HRM can play a major role in supporting and promoting the Centre through current notice practices. Launching the Centre and web site concurrently will create a new image for planning in the HRM.

Education and promotion will also encourage people who are not currently engaged in planning processes to become involved. This will require specific research to identify target groups and determine the most appropriate ways to promote planning awareness.

5.4.3 Phase 3: Maintenance and evaluation
Once the Planning Centre exists, it is important to develop a program of continual evaluation. This will enable staff to re-evaluate needs and service provision. As needs and issues change, different types of information may be necessary. Since information is always being produced (or revised), and planning projects continue to be proposed, there is a need to continually update and upgrade the collections of the Planning Centre. As well, the Centre will be the ideal place to perform continual evaluation of the goals and intents of regional planning. Capitalising on the energy and proactive discussions emanating from the Centre, the community will be able to re-evaluate and articulate changing visions for the future.
Eventually, the Centre would expand to serve Atlantic Canada. The ability to provide advice and objective analysis will be strengthened over time and with experience. The Centre will initially focus on improving awareness of local planning issues by the population of the HRM. Once these resources and support are established, it would be the ideal facility to conduct research on issues of interest to the Atlantic provinces.
CHAPTER SIX
Conclusions

6.1 Summary of contributions
This investigation has revealed the information needs of participants in the planning process in the HRM, and provided ways of addressing them. The mission of the municipality is to “deliver efficient, effective and responsive services” (HRM 1999), and this study has revealed some ways in which meeting this objective may be enhanced. This thesis combines literature and comparative field research to guide the development of a Planning Centre for the local community.

It is fitting to revisit the words of Udy (1996) in concluding this thesis (see Section 2.2). We plan to “save or enhance things we, as a society care about” (Udy 1996: ii); the Planning Centre will facilitate the dialogue necessary to achieve this goal. Fostering mutual understanding through information exchange and discussion will enable communities to plan; to identify and protect valued assets.

6.1.1 Significance and importance of research
In recent decades the role of the planner has progressed from expert to educator and facilitator (Muir 1998). This implies increased focus on public participation, and decision-making by consensus. As the literature suggests, in general public participation in planning is positive; the quality of participation can be improved, however, by increasing availability of relevant, reliable planning information. Information users have
often complained that the methods they have to collect information are scattered and haphazard (Farris 1996). Improving access to information will encourage or enable the participation of more individuals in the planning process. The case studies have provided inventive ways of addressing information deficiencies and facilitating a collaborative process in community planning in the HRM. A one-stop Planning Centre can create positive energy and foster lifelong learning within the community.

6.2 Future research

This thesis research focuses on a specific situation, increasing awareness of planning in the HRM. The implications of more accessible, unbiased information on planning processes is an important area of research, particularly in terms of justifying the creation of planning information centres (and associated budgetary requirements).

Other areas for future exploration include the potential for new technologies in information exchange. While GIS is continuing to be exploited as a mechanism for efficient visualisation, other techniques could benefit from further study and integration with existing methods of information exchange. The Internet can be an effective information tool, but many municipal departments have limited or out-of-date material available online. Additional research could determine what each department or agency can do to improve access and legibility of their respective sites.
Finally, further study is required to develop a strategy or business plan outlining funding and implementation of the new planning facility. This research is the first step for this investigation. An exploration into potential locations for the facility, cost sharing and partnership opportunities is the logical next step to ensure implementation.
APPENDIX A

Planning Information Needs Questionnaire & Results
Note: comments for Questions 8, 10 and 11 appear after survey
There were 47 survey respondents.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study!

Section 1: Background and Demographics

1. Which of the following most closely matches your function / job title, as it relates to the planning process?
   - public participant / concerned citizen 14
   - member / leader of interest group 5
   - councillor 5
   - planner 2
   - other professional (engineer, architect, etc.) 1
   - developer 2
   - real estate agent / broker 2
   - professor / academic 4
   - student 10
   - other (please specify: ___________________) 2
      - assistant municipal clerk
      - environmental scientist

2. Which of the following most closely reflects your interest / function in the planning process?
   - administration 2
   - legislation / policy 3
   - local government 3
   - professional (planning, engineering, architecture) 13
   - private sector 3
   - development 3
   - environment 18
   - public participation 6
   - other (please specify: ___________________) 4
      - HRM people-friendly
      - academic
      - planning practice
      - planning process
Section 2: Uncovering Information Needs

3. What is your single most important source for the planning information you need?
   - municipal planning office: 16
   - public library: 2
   - academic library: 2
   - internet: 8
   - personal journal subscription(s): 2
   - newspapers: 3
   - TV / radio: 2
   - colleague(s): 9
   - consultant: 0
   - municipal staff reports: 10
   - professional body (API, CIP, etc.): 0
   - other (please specify: ______________________): 3 - gov’t departments - questions - WAB minutes

4. Would you rate your need for planning information as:
   - frequent and intense (daily, or several times per week): 11
   - average or regular (weekly, or 2-3 times per month): 21
   - sporadic (when starting new projects, responding to an inquiry, obtaining background information): 15
   - negligible (I rarely need or obtain planning information): 0
5. How often do you use the following types of information? (please check one for each type of information):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information</th>
<th>daily</th>
<th>2-4 times per week</th>
<th>2-4 times per month</th>
<th>monthly</th>
<th>2-6 times per year</th>
<th>yearly or less frequently</th>
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<td>13</td>
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6. How do you typically obtain the following types of information? (check all that apply)

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<th>acad lib</th>
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<th>journal newspaper</th>
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7. How often have you experienced difficulty in finding or obtaining any information needed? (please check one for each type of information)

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<th>Information</th>
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<th>2-4 times per month</th>
<th>monthly</th>
<th>2-6 times per year</th>
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<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8. What type of information has been most difficult to obtain, and why?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Section 3: Value of Information

9. Can you estimate the number of hours you would save per week if the information you required were always readily available?
   m none - the information I need is always readily available 5
   m less than 1 hour 18
   m 2 - 4 hours 15
   m 4 - 6 hours 4
   m 6 - 8 hours 3
   m more than 8 hours 2

10. Please describe any products, services or information that could be provided to make you more productive in your work, or better informed as a player in the planning process:

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

11. Feel free to include any other comments you may have regarding access to planning information in the Halifax Regional Municipality.

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Thank you very much for your time!
Question 8 - What type of information has been most difficult to obtain, and why?

- accurate, independent critique of development applications
- accountability - who published information available?
- awareness - it’s most difficult to get info when you don’t know what to ask for. The difficulty is awareness of applications, projects, reports, studies underway
- background reports - hard to find out what studies, etc pertain to particular piece of land
- background reports - not sure where to look, dated info not easily retrievable
- bkgd report --> procedural: hard for a private person to obtain
- cost - some materials expensive to obtain
- devel apps - specifics, developers reluctant to disclose intentions to public scrutiny
- development agreements
- development plans
- development / environmental requirements - nobody wants to commit
- environment / water testing results - required in DA (no mechanism to store / distribute); new phenomenon, maybe system has not adjusted yet
- environmental - municipalities do not have qualified staff in the scientific discipline; so they get uptight about matters relating to the environment
- environmental survey data - (e.g. water quality reports) can be difficult to obtain. Sometimes it is due to lack of enforcement (i.e. developer was required to do water analysis but did not do it)
- i don’t often look for a lot of information myself - obtain through reliable source: community group leader
- literature - cost
- manuals - usually because lengthy periods of time may have elapsed since it was published
- mapping information - lack of readily available and reliable information
- maps
- maps
- maps, procedural information
- most info difficult to find
- MPS - not provided by municipalities. only provided by interested parties outside of municipal office
- mps - phone tag, trying to get a hold of someone who knows something; clerks office not helpful in getting this info to people unless you are a planner or
technician making demands - run around is a problem
• MPS, development plans for HRM (need to be on internet)
• municipality - info obtained there takes the longest
• non-HRM legislation
• none - municipal staff / consultants are normally very cooperative
• older information - often necessary to sort out what is going on now
• older material (more than ~ 10 yrs) may be missing
• paper storage - info in various places
• past records
• private industry generated reports
• public works plans - information not easily accessible on the web
• residential market reports - because of cost
• scientific reports - data, studies
• scientific studies - capacity or limits of natural resources regarding population growth (blind greed)
• site plans - difficult to locate
• staff reports - more difficult to obtain from public libraries
• staff reports - pain to track down, should be online
• technology developments - our market area is relatively small
• traffic studies - info for Hfx (recent); lack of cooperation of traffic planners
• up-to-date plans
• water quality reports - reports relating to water quality monitoring imposed upon developers by development agreements. HRM does not have a good system for storing such information.
• water testing - chemical analysis (time & cost factors)

Question 10 - Please describe any products, services or information that could be provided to make you more productive in your work, or better informed as a player in the planning process:

• accurate, informed reviews by qualified professionals (HRM staff or independent) when reviewing development applications (not rehashing the self-critique provided by the applicant)
• advisory boards - well-educated and experienced individuals with diverse education do excellent job of advising HRM
• awareness - what is happening
• catalog - what info exists
• central - public info should be available at ONE central location
• central location - for documents; with knowledgeable staff
- central office - municipalities should have a central office where all planning documents as well as env reports are lodged. Perhaps they could charge a token fee for issuing copies. Now is takes weeks and weeks to get info!
- central location - locate municipal planning office closer to Service Nova Scotia’s LIS office (most important)
- central place for info - provide same services as web site (above)
- cross-topic information
- development - complete info, not piecemeal submissions
- education - public needs to know requirements
- enforcement - better capability by HRM to ensure terms of DA are adhered to. Infractions are readily discoverable, but response by HRM is inadequate
- environmental requirements - charges and fines
- GIS - databases for all basic info in HRM & NS; available online or at school
- guide - as to where i may locate municipal documents and research documents would assist me to locate the appropriate information quickly
- internet - all info should be available online, save time and money for me and for municipality (no need for paper copies)
- internet - better search methods; more info available
- internet - HRM web site: needs info about history of planning pre/post amalgamation; plans/projects (current); description of planning process (for avg citizens); electronic + paper documents
- internet - land registry info
- internet - more planning info could be posted
- public inquiries - HRM & other local gov’ts should have someone responsible for dealing with these
- internet - most products and services should be provided online (as in Vancouver)
- internet - mps, bylaws, staff reports, ALL public information should be accessible (save time, gas, money)
- internet - need info clearinghouse, specifically for NS provincial info (sorted by topic)
- internet - planning reports, zoning, and land use policies posted/available on website
- internet - post minutes of public hearings
- internet - provide all available info; i don’t often have time to look anywhere else
- internet - provide more services, documents, maps online
- internet - up-to-date HRM web site, particularly WRT planning (better directory - names, positions, contact info, duties of staff)
- internet - logical, efficient, time-saving (esp. for people who do research/work from home)
- intravenous info downloading - info growing exponentially, but time to absorb &
process not increasing; info digests helpful
• library or databank of info collected by community groups in NS - common source for planning info!
• mailout
• maps - more and better maps of watersheds and developments
• maps - ready access to HRM mapping products;
• maps/newspaper - advertisements no longer publish maps; public does not receive all necessary info
• MPS for HRM - as a whole (regional) rather than the continuance of the systems put in place by the 4 municipalities prior to amalgamation
• phone directory - more detailed entries to ensure you get to the right person (munic & provincial)
• referrals from neighbours / friends interested in the same as I
• research assistants - indispensable
• regularly updated information identifiers
• science reports - made available to general public
• staffing - project funding apps require thorough staffing, familiarity with supporting documents; committee work facilitated by maps, overheads
• test results & correspondence
• water quality reports - accompanied by an objective evaluation of results
• zoning - better descriptions (some vague, need specifications)

Question 11 - Feel free to include any other comments you may have regarding access to planning information in the Halifax Regional Municipality.

• As a councillor, this process does not present difficulty. I would, however, appreciate learning how the public responds.
• As chairman of the Halifax WAB my involvement and needs differ from developers or most of the public. HRM needs to develop policy and bylaws to consolidate its development strategy; needs to develop a vision of where HRM should be in 10-20 yrs, including environmental concerns related to cumulative impact rather than point source releases (including cluster vs. sprawl development; and removal of “as-of-right” development provisions which allow developers to ignore current knowledge on development strategies and environmental sensitivities.
• central source - there should be one place to go to get all planning information, or where someone would know where to get it
• Central info office for all depts is the answer!
• cost - little info available online for free
• MPS & LUB - only available by purchasing documents ($10-20); not available
online
• generally readily available and accessible
• gov’t depts - hard to coordinate between different depts, test results, reports, past actions taken, etc.
• good intentions of policies / guidelines often frustrated by as-of-right approval process
• I find there has been improvement in access to information over the past 20 years
• information - hard to know where to go
• internet - have more information on HRM web
• lack of long term comprehensive plan for HRM seriously hampers taking a global view
• mps/secondary planning strategies - should be available at each munic. planning office for general inquiries
• munic. staff - very helpful in providing info when asked; need to hire more well-informed helpful staff to provide info to the public
• planning - on-going reorganisation, little continuity, hard to connect a planner to a place
• planning library - Halifax once had an excellent planning library, and then a planning information office. Now that seems to be all gone - a great loss. Municipal Affairs lost its libraries & its collection. It has become increasingly difficult to get any historical depth on planning issues in Halifax.
• planning profile - most people don’t seem to know exactly what planning is all about. When I tell people I’m studying planning, a lot of them reply with “do you sit around playing SimCity all day?”
• planning staff - has been very cooperative
• public meetings - HRM, and other govt depts shied away from public meetings in preference of “open houses” which are long (3-4 hours)
• regional planning - positive step under Peter Kelly; ten year supply of lots, working with developers, will shape HRM’s future
• regional strategy - halifax needs to plan; come up with a plan for the whole area, then make decisions about development
• staff are decent people, generally. it is just that the planning department is a very DISORGANISED dept. (as well as other depts).
• this research - very worthwhile effort
### Monkey business

**To the editor**> Who is in charge of urban planning for Halifax? I couldn’t find a name on the city’s website. I even e-mailed the mayor. No response. I have a theory, though. I think it’s a monkey named Bobo. I think he sits in his cage all day, whistling and drawing on his “city planning easel.” Every now and then someone comes in and checks on him. “What have you got for us today Bobo? Ooo! Look at the new road he’s drawn. Look at all the pretty traffic lights every thirty feet and the 300 crosswalks! Good Bobo! Here’s a banana.”

He’d better be getting paid fucking bananas. I’m a new resident of Halifax and I think it is a terrible city. There are lots of things to do, the events in the summer are top-notch, the trees are beautiful and I love being near the ocean. And the city is growing. You can see that every day in the amount of development occurring in Bedford, Clayton Park and, well, everywhere.

So it’s time for Bobo to go. Oh, I’m sure the decision to hire a monkey was a good one back in the day. I mean, after the Armdale Rotary was built, I’m sure everyone took a good look and figured a monkey could do a better job. But I don’t think Bobo can cut it anymore.

Who’s been locked up in traffic, backed up over the MacKay bridge all the way to Burnside because construction is occurring on your way home at four in the afternoon? Who’s driven to work and watched construction workers begin laying out cones just as business traffic is heading into town? Maybe the mayor is on vacation and that’s why he didn’t e-mail me. Well, I’m sure he might realise in Florida, city construction occurs at NIGHT. When impact to traffic is MINIMAL. I’m throwing that one out there for free.

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I once got a ride in a cab from the south end, all the way down Robie to Lady Hammond. We hit three (THREE!) green lights in a row and I tipped the guy five bucks for having a spiritual connection with Jesus or something. He gave it back; he said he didn’t want to jinx it. Anyone go to Bayer’s Lake Wal-Mart on Saturday? You know, where there’s space for 20,000 to park and only a two-lane road? Yeah, good city planning, Bobo.

Since the roads were already built, I called the city about the lights. I asked why none of the traffic lights in the city were timed. The secretary I talked to said they were. Yes, I’m aware that the lights are times to go from green to amber to red, but I don’t think she really understood. I don’t think Bobo knows either. Go ask any civil engineer. He’ll tell you what I mean. He’ll also say that the University of Waterloo, in their program for Urban Regional Planning, teaches that Halifax is a bad example. I’ve heard that the lights are timed for 60 klicks. That doesn’t help if the level of traffic necessitates that everyone go slower. There are buses, crosswalks, pedestrians, two fucking lanes. Someone take Bobo to another city in Canada. Pick one. Their traffic lights are timed. It’s really, really neat.

Anyone who’s taken a crack at SimCity knows that if there’s traffic congestion, the SimCitizens get sad. The city is growing and there isn’t enough room for a lot of improvement. Therefore, it’s up to the city to look down the road, as it were, a few years and plan shit out. Is there a plan? Does council know? If it doesn’t, then that’s our fault. The next time you’re stuck in senseless traffic, cursing Bobo, go home and write a letter. The mayor’s address is on the city’s website.

The site has no contact information for Bobo. Then again, maybe there is no Bobo. Maybe there is just a guy who’s never gotten a Megalopolis in SimCity. Maybe he thought up the Armdale Rotary. If that’s the case, maybe we should hire a fucking monkey.

*Blair Saltel, Halifax*
More monkey business

To the editor> Blair Saltel’s letter (September 19) was entertaining, but he blames the wrong primate in his speculation that HRM’s traffic woes can be attributed to Bobo the city-planning monkey.

A proposal for fewer crosswalks and more high speed, multi-lane roads has been demonstrated in numerous places (like Southern California, where I last lived) to make transportation hell for pedestrians, cyclists and those who use wheel chairs. And drivers still idle their time away in traffic, fuming at the tailpipe and at the ears.

Instead, point the finger at the Homo sapiens who haven’t yet realised that the surest recipe for traffic congestion is to use two tonnes of road-hogging steel, rubber and gas every time one needs to grab a loaf of bread or go to work.

Lawrence Plug, Herring Cove
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