

# Barrington Street Historic District

## *Property and Business Owners' Guide*

*The Committee of stakeholders set up by HRM Council in 2004 to develop a set of guidelines for designating Barrington Street as a Historic District is now completing its report. In this guide you will find:*

- *a description of the Historic District concept*
- *a general outline of the Standards and Incentives recommended by the Committee*
- *an outline of the opportunities the recommendations give to property and business owners within the District.*
- *a detailed list of the Committee's proposals for registered and non-registered buildings*

*“I have never visited a downtown with a successful record of economic revitalization where historic preservation wasn't a key element of the strategy.”*

- Donovan Rypkema, Urban Critic

## **HOW DID WE GET HERE?**

After the Second World War, the rapid development of the automobile and of service roads in and out of cities in North America led to the steady growth of suburbs. City residents migrated to the outskirts, commuting daily into the city and back. The pattern was soon to be repeated worldwide. With the arrival of malls on the city's edge, department stores and many retail outlets also moved away from the centre, which often became an economic wasteland.

For many cities the solution to inner city decay was demolition and renewal. Thousands of old buildings, residential and retail, were cleared from the downtown of cities all over the world, and replaced with tall office towers.

But gradually cities, from New York to Singapore, realized that the whole character of the place they called 'home' was being lost. The atmosphere, the reminders of past history, the human scale attractiveness of old stores, houses and apartment buildings were disappearing under the rubble. Cities had lost their character and charm, and their civic pride. Visitors came to 'historic' cities expecting to experience the city's personality, then, finding none, stayed away.

## **SOLUTION: THE 'HISTORIC DISTRICT' LEADS THE WAY TO ECONOMIC REVITALIZATION**

So, increasingly, many of the cities of the world developed another solution. Instead of bulldozing the past wholesale they began to select 'Historic Districts' to restore and renovate, modernizing but at the same time keeping the scale and attractiveness of old architecture. At first this was simply a 'heritage' project. But soon it was discovered that by breathing new life into an old district, they were not only restoring the district's buildings and preserving its character, but they were also making it economically viable. People came back to enjoy the cafés and the attractive walking areas, and to live in renovated living spaces. Elegant stores returned to the centre, and art galleries, theatres and restaurants followed. The downtown was alive again. Visitors flocked back to enjoy the excitement. Another 'historic district' had been preserved.

## WHAT IS A HISTORIC DISTRICT?

Historic districts were described in 1987 by the Canadian Historic Sites and Monuments Board as:

***“geographically defined areas which create a special sense of time and place through buildings, structures and open spaces modified by human use and which are united by past events and use and/or aesthetically, by architecture and plan.”***

Since 1960, over two thousand Historic Districts, both business and residential, have been designated in the United States, and over thirty in Canada. Many old cities, like New Orleans and St. Louis, have several districts so designated. In each case, the character of the district is preserved by instituting special standards and guidelines. These provide a framework within which property and business owners develop their buildings and their businesses. The result in every case has been to create a district with unique character and charm. Residential areas have been restored, raising property values and increasing the attractiveness of the city as a place to live.

***Historic business districts have once again become centres of economic activity, bringing residents and visitors alike back to the city’s heart.***

## GASTOWN – A SUCCESS STORY

There are countless examples of the dramatic effect of designating Historic Districts. One of Canada’s most famous is Vancouver’s Gastown. In the 1960s, as the city expanded, the entire run-down area came close to demolition. But community groups drew attention to the historic character of Gastown, and pushed for revitalizing the area. Modern developers became interested in getting involved. The City of Vancouver began a beautification project, installing street furniture, brick paving and streetlamps. In 1971, Gastown was designated a Historic District. Gastown today boasts a rich variety of retail stores and restaurants and is one of the city’s most popular tourist attractions.

## BARRINGTON STREET

The worldwide pattern of downtown decay was repeated in Halifax. Malls drew the great department stores like Eatons and Birks away from Barrington Street, followed by smaller retail outlets. With the loss of shopper traffic, Barrington Street lost its old reason for existing, and for many years studies have been carried out to analyze the problems and to seek a solution. Vacancy rates rose. Buildings decayed. In the 1960s and '70s, 'urban renewal' began to clear away some old buildings, and tall complexes like Scotia Square and The Maritime Centre took their place. But there was increasing concern that Halifax's historic centre was going to be lost, and many handsome 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings were saved from demolition.

Since the 1990s, some individual property owners have been doing magnificent work in restoring and tastefully modernizing the old buildings along the street. But their enterprise has not been supported by the overall context of the street.

***And again and again the solution presented itself: before it is further fractured, the downtown stretch of Barrington Street must be designated as a Historic District, to breathe new life into the heart of our old city. This has been the conclusion of at least two reports, but until now, there has been no further action.***

Finally, in 2004, HRM Council took a decisive step, appointing a Committee made up of planners, property owners, business owners and heritage folk, to develop a plan for Barrington Street as Halifax's first Historic District. They met over the course of a year. Their final report is due in July 2005.

Meanwhile, the Communications Committee of the initiative has developed this guide for the use of property and business owners within the proposed Barrington Street Historic District, which will comprise the stretch of the street between City Hall (circa1888) and Government House (circa1800).

It is expected that the success of this Historic District will lead to its extension, and to the designation of other districts within HRM. In this way, we will ensure that the character of our beautiful and historic city is preserved, serving the city's residents and at the same time attracting visitors and dynamic new businesses to Halifax and to the Regional Municipality.

## HOW DO HISTORIC DISTRICTS WORK?

When a city council designates an area of its city as a Historic District, a series of guidelines are put into place which govern and shape the future development of that District. These guidelines generally fall into two categories: Standards and Incentives.

There is no set format for these guidelines. Some Councils put binding legislation programs into place which heavily restrict what can and cannot be done by property owners. Some incentive programs are more generous than others. But the principles of these two programs are common to all Historic Districts. In other words, property and business owners are:

- Encouraged by incentives to develop their properties in accordance with the over-all plan for the district.
- Required to submit their plans for development of their properties and businesses to the Council, to ensure that their plans will enhance and not detract from the over-all character of the District. This is already the procedure when developing any building or area in the downtown core. The Historic District guidelines merely provide an extra level of protection, overlaying the already existing building standards.

## THE PLAN FOR BARRINGTON STREET

HRM's Barrington Street Committee, made up of all stakeholders, has met regularly for one year to find a workable balance between the need to conserve heritage on Barrington Street and the need to give property and business owners freedom to be imaginative and to increase the value and income of their properties.

*The over-all aim is to provide a framework for the dynamic economic and aesthetic revitalization of Barrington Street.*

The recommendations propose somewhat different guidelines for Registered Buildings (Class 1) and Non-Registered Buildings (Class 2). You will find a detailed account of the Committee's recommendations starting on page 8. The following is a general introduction.

## **STANDARDS**

*HRM already has in place many regulations which control development within the Municipality. The new standards being proposed to preserve the identity of the Barrington Street Historic District simply provide a further level of protection to maintain the identity of the Historic District.*

### **AESTHETIC STANDARDS**

It is understood that the aesthetic standards proposed by the Committee are designed to govern only the exterior of buildings – the external elements which give the street its character. These include awnings and signs, and the preservation of historic store fronts and facades. Property owners are free to develop the interior of their property as they see fit, within the normal requirements of building codes.

Many property owners have already led the way in preserving and restoring the exteriors of heritage and non-heritage buildings. The proposed new standards provide a ‘context’ in which their achievement is fully realized and supported.

### **HEIGHT STANDARDS**

Presently any proposed building height over 40 feet is subject to a number of HRM regulations and policies. These policies give fairly strong heritage protection and encourage additions to blend in with existing nearby heritage buildings.

The committee has agreed that the existing policies do provide an already strong level of regulation and is not suggesting that these be strengthened at this time, despite the fact that most Historic Districts in other cities do set height limits for development. It is important that any developments on Barrington complement the existing historic and retail-oriented nature of the street.

### **DEMOLITION**

The Committee has not recommended a total ban on demolition, but has proposed that any application for demolition of a building be accompanied by plans for the proposed replacement building. A property owner would only be able to demolish a property if HRM was able to approve the replacement building as an enhancement of the Historic District. A time-delay would be required for both registered and non-registered buildings.

### **NEW BUILDINGS**

The Committee recommends that HRM’s normal requirements for new building be followed for the Historic District, and to avoid ambiguity is providing a glossary of terms to clarify some HRM regulations.

## **INCENTIVES**

### **EXTERIOR RENOVATIONS**

HRM already has in place a number of programs designed to assist owners of registered heritage properties with the costs of facade improvements, including renovation and restoration of storefronts, upper facades, and signs;

Provincial grants are available for conservation advice;

Federal grants are also available for interior/exterior rehabilitation under certain conditions. The Committee's recommendations for incentives in the Historic District include additional incentives for storefronts, signs and awnings. These additional incentives will apply to all buildings in the district, not just to registered heritage properties.

### **LEASING GUIDELINES**

HRM has a preferential leasing policy in place to encourage the use of heritage buildings for HRM offices. The Committee recommends a stronger commitment by HRM to this policy.

### **TAX INCENTIVES**

The Committee proposes a freeze of property tax (Commercial and Business Occupancy, for ten years from adoption of plan) to encourage property owners to participate in District revitalization.

### **STREET IMPROVEMENTS**

As a further incentive for both owners and visitors, the Committee also recommends that HRM undertake a series of improvements to the street, including mid-block pedestrian amenity areas; the 'calming' of traffic; upgraded sidewalks; new lighting and street furniture, flowerbeds and tree plantings.

### **MARKETING OF THE HISTORIC DISTRICT**

As a contribution to the Committee's proposals, the Downtown Halifax Business Commission has undertaken to set up a marketing program with the objectives of attracting 1) new retail businesses and 2) residents and visitors, to the Historic District.

## **SUMMARY**

*The proposals outlined here make it clear that the Committee is putting out a hand to business and property owners, inviting them to join in the creative task of revitalizing Barrington Street as a Historic District. It is also clear that owners will be offered considerable financial incentives for doing so, and that their work will be supported by a series of measures designed to improve the over-all attractiveness of the District.*

*It is worth repeating that HRM's existing regulations already provide much of the infrastructure for the preservation of the Municipality's heritage. The strategies proposed by the Committee for Barrington Street are designed to clarify these existing regulations, and to supplement them with additional standards and incentives which will encourage and stimulate the creation of Halifax's first Historic District.*

*The specific details of the Committee's recommendations can be found on the charts on the following pages.*