

# Community rejects govt plans

Lawrencetown is a small self-contained community 14 miles north of Halifax where the two main topics of conversation are, in winter, the fog which rolls in from the Atlantic, and in summer, the influx of Halifax area residents to the local beaches.

For the most part, Lawrencetown is a quiet community: many people commute to Halifax for jobs and the families have been in the area for years.

Three years ago, however, a noisy controversy erupted which shook the community to its foundations.

It all began in April 1975 when a man living in the area decided to winterize his mobile home and made the routine application to the provincial Department of Municipal Affairs for the building permit. He was surprised when this normal request was denied and even more surprised by the reason: he was told, "you're living in a park."

At the same time another resident wanting to add a garage to his house was also denied a building permit on the same grounds—he was told that he was living in a park and all "development" was prohibited.

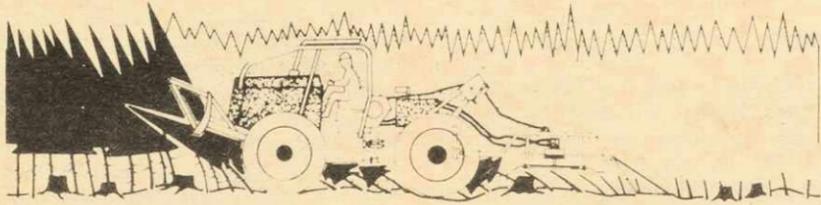
A few quick enquiries revealed that it was true. On April 15, 1975 the Liberal cabinet of Gerald Regan had approved by an order-in-council the Halifax Dartmouth Regional Plan, thus making Lawrencetown a park.

community feelings: "Overnight our growth was being restricted and we were threatened with the prospect of being removed from our homes by government expropriation."

What most angered Lawrencetown residents was the arbitrariness with which they had been handled. There was never a public meeting of any sort in the area to discuss the Halifax-Dartmouth plan before it was implemented. There was no indication that they were being included in any rethinking of the Metro area's development. Lawrencetown only learned of the implications of the Plan after it had been made law.

These feelings of outrage were further exacerbated when residents seeking building permits learned that the government wasn't able to say whose land or how much land was affected by the Plan. No surveys had been done of the area, so all that existed was a splash of green ink of varying widths on the official map and the designation that 'green' meant 'recreational and park'. The government wasn't sure whose property was included in their splash of green ink but, taking no chances, they were denying permits to anyone in the proximity.

In the fall of 1975, 300 people attended a public meeting in the Lawrencetown Community Centre. By this point people feared that government expropriation of



The Plan had generated a lot of debate in the Halifax-Dartmouth Metro area since it was first proposed in the early '70's. A number of meetings, sponsored by various government bodies, had been held in the twin cities over a period of a few years, and the people in the urban areas were well aware of the Plan and its effects.

But while the Plan was billed as the **Halifax-Dartmouth Plan**, no one noticed that an over-eager planner had included Lawrencetown in their work. On the upper right hand corner of the fancy colour-coded map, Lawrencetown was painted green and deemed to be "a green belt"—and that meant no development.

No one was more surprised and angered by this discovery than the residents of Lawrencetown. One resident summed up

their land was around the corner.

At that meeting a committee of six community residents was elected and given the mandate to meet with the Minister of Municipal Affairs, Glen Bagnell, to express "in no uncertain terms" the concerns of the community on the matter.

When the Lawrencetown committee met with the Minister things seemed to go well. They were told that a consultant would be hired to come up with a more appropriate plan for the area.

In the late fall of 1975, H.J. Porter and Associates Ltd.—"environmental consultants" they were called—were hired.

Fifteen months later, the Lawrencetown community was called to a public meeting organized by the citizens' committee. This time 700 people turned out to be presented



"... they never say thanks anymore ..."

with the "Porter Plan". The summaries of the Plan were distributed in the meeting and people were told that their committee had already endorsed the plan as being better than the original.

But the community wasn't satisfied, and wholeheartedly rejected the Porter Plan. At the meeting people pointed out that this new plan affected less land, but the land that was still designated as "park" was more restricted in use than it was in the original plan. Some more cynical members of the community also pointed out that all of the properties of the six Lawrencetown committee members were now in unrestricted areas on the map.

The Lawrencetown people saw through the government's attempt to divide them into two camps, and with near unanimity, they refused to endorse this new plan.

The meeting dissolved without resolution. Shortly thereafter the Lawrencetown committee dissolved as well.

It was replaced by a government-appointed committee which was given the mandate to oversee the implementation and acceptance of the Porter Plan in the community that had just rejected it.

This committee refused to hold public meetings and would only meet with community residents on a one-to-one basis. In a series of these private meetings, people discovered that neighbours are being given different stories by committee members—everyone was suspicious and confused.

Finally, on September 12, 1978 the committee called a public meeting, this time to tell the community that their new and improved revised plan had already been adopted by the government.

Outraged, the people voted non-confidence in the government appointed committee and decided to organize their own ad-hoc committee. An interim committee was created at this time to plan

a new public meeting, at which meeting a responsible citizens' committee could be elected.

This meeting was held October 5, 1978 and a new committee of ten people was elected—two from each of the five regions in Lawrencetown. The terms of reference for the committee were to be:

- limitation of the regional development plan to areas which do not interfere with the rights of citizens (i.e. the beaches and salt marshes);
- acquisition of all property at fair market value;
- any planning process has to involve an elected and responsible citizens' committee;
- protection of the environment through strict enforcement of already existing regulations; and
- community approved controls to prevent the exploitation of the resources of the area by developers.

Meanwhile, the Nova Scotian provincial election intervened. Prior to the election the new Lawrencetown committee succeeded in securing a promise from the Progressive Conservatives, then in opposition, that the park would not be imposed against the wishes of the people and that the terms of reference of the new committee would be honoured.

The residents of Lawrencetown are confident that they won their battle against development plans. Their newly-elected MLA, Tom McInnes, a Conservative Cabinet Minister, fought his campaign, in part, on this issue and Lawrencetown is counting on his support. It remains to be seen whether this promise will be compromised—as many other Conservative election promises have been. However, the residents have already shown they can organize quickly and forcefully, and know only too well they cannot afford to ease the pressure.

CANADA

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