



THE FALL 2019 EDITION

View

FROM

Blue



Published by Blue Mountain
Ratepayers' Association

www.bmra.ca

Box 198, Thornbury, Ontario NOH 2P0

GETTING OUT OF THE BLOCKS

Taking Stock of our New Council's First Year in Office

It has been about one full year since our new Council assumed office. In trying to get a sense of what they have accomplished, we looked back on the priorities that they identified through their campaign commitments. The BMRA requested each candidate identify their top three priorities. In reviewing their responses, we determined that the following were the most frequently cited;

- 1) Communication and Trust with the community, Council and Staff
- 2) Update and implement the Official Plan, in alignment with the Sustainable Path document
- 3) Tangible progress in developing Attainable Housing
- 4) Increase accountability and transparency in Town service delivery and budget management, and pursue fair value from County levies

Overall, as evidenced by a member survey we conducted in October, early views of our new Council's performance are generally positive. When reviewing their delivery against the stated priorities, here is where we netted out;

1) Communication and Trust

Progress to Date - We have seen significant effort to connect with TBM residents, to keep us informed and solicit our feedback. Town surveys, launch of the "Your View" section on the Town website, numerous Meet the Mayor sessions and Council member appearances at Citizens Forum sessions all represent commitment to this objective.

Still to be Determined - In meetings the BMRA have held with Townhall representatives, we have observed constructive and respectful interactions between Council and Staff. Amongst Council members themselves, collaboration is still something of an open question. There is seeming improvement over prior Councils, but can they all demonstrate the willingness and ability to "row together"?

A "One Year In" public forum will be held 7-9pm, Thursday November 21 at the Marsh Street Centre. Hosted by the BMRA, Citizens Forum and the BMVA, the session will be a moderated discussion and Q&A with Mayor Alar Soever, Councillor Rob Sampson and Councillor Andrea Matrosos. The evening will conclude with a reception including hors d'oeuvres and cash bar. An RSVP email will be sent to all association members in advance.

2) Update Official Plan in Alignment with the Sustainable Path

Progress to Date - Seemingly limited. Effective control of development is the #1 concern of our members. All candidates stated that reinvigorating the Sustainable Path strategy was of critical importance. To this point, it is not obvious how far this has advanced. The Sustainability Committee has been relaunched, but to our knowledge has not yet defined its vision, scope and priorities. There has been effort to communicate new, upcoming development proposals in a more effective and timely manner, but more has to be done in this regard. Deputy Mayor Bartnicki has made a recommendation to enact a more formal and comprehensive development communication process - we will monitor its progress to see if this comes to fruition.

3) Progress on Attainable Housing

Progress to Date - The early signs are positive. Led by Councillor Rob Sampson in his role of Chair of the TBM Attainable Housing Corporation, a number of steps have been taken. The site selection process is moving ahead, the old Foodland site is going to be purchased for town use, and a Request For Information has been sent out to potential development partners.

Still to be Determined - The exercise will be lengthy to get us to the point where Attainable Housing becomes a reality - the key questions are whether the early momentum can be maintained, will the financial model prove viable, and what housing density will be required to meet the objectives?

4) Increase Financial Accountability and Transparency

Progress to Date - The 2019 Town budget was almost fully baked when the new Council found its footing early in 2019. For that reason, it did not seem like they were really able to leave their mark on its final form. Based on our understanding of the 2020 budget process, there is a commitment to achieving efficiencies and not assuming a "business as usual" philosophy. This seems of the utmost importance given the fiscal challenges the TBM is facing - looming Provincial funding cutbacks, the likelihood of increasing TBM levies from Grey County and the very substantial infrastructure investments needed to maintain our community's quality of life.

Still to be Determined - As stated, the 2020 TBM budget is likely the most important fiscal exercise the town has gone through - the stakes are certainly the highest. We'll need to see whether Council and Staff can find innovative ways to deliver services more efficiently, can the "implementation gap" be addressed so that our infrastructure build catches up with our growth, and will greater accountability and fair return be realized with our County and School Board tax levies.

In summary, while early signs are promising, the real test will be seeing how Council and Staff are able to work together to achieve real progress in responsibly managing our municipal tax dollars, and maintain our appealing quality of life while tackling the wide variety of growth related challenges we face.



"No Taxation without Appropriate Representation"

Taking some license with the famous phrase from the American revolution, the challenge we see with our tax levies from the County is that, while we recognize the County does provide necessary services for the TBM, and it is only appropriate that we pay our fair share, it is difficult to know if we are receiving value for our County contribution. Our initial article on the TBM – County relationship, "Striving for Value", identified potential increases in TBM property taxes - that if current property value trends continue in Grey County, our share of County tax revenues could rise significantly from the current 26% level. In a recent survey the BMRA conducted with our members, 89% of respondents expressed concern that our tax dollars being sent to the County - which represent 40% of our total tax bills - could compromise our ability to fund our growing infrastructure requirements.

It is obvious that anticipated tax increases, in conjunction with cutbacks to Provincial funding for municipalities, create an urgent need for new approaches to how our municipal government is funded, and operates

We see the key financial priorities as;

- 1) Revenue enhancement
- 2) Town budget efficiencies
- 3) Service delivery efficiencies, including new and better ways to coordinate efforts with the County
- 4) Logical structuring of service delivery models beyond the County confines (ie Blue Mountains transit that serves 3500 riders per month between Wasaga Beach, Collingwood and Blue Mountain

Regarding the third point, finding service delivery efficiencies, and pushing for more control over program development and funding with the County - "No Taxation without Appropriate Representation" - a couple recent experiences suggest that the County does not recognize our concerns.

BUDGET 2020 – MANY QUESTIONS TO BE ANSWERED

The 2020 TBM budget process is moving forward, with some delay (now targeting January 2020 delivery timing) as Council and Staff attempt to incorporate some new aspects to the exercise, and grapple with significant funding and expenditure issues. There are positive signs to date;

- Difficult staffing decisions have been made to ensure key Town positions are filled by highly qualified employees
- Mayor Soever has championed MPAC "catching up" with assessments to ensure that all residents are paying appropriate tax levels given their true property value - this includes new home builds that were still being assessed and taxed at levels as unbuilt lots, more than a year after residents had moved in. Town revenues have clearly benefited, and tax fairness has improved as a result.
- The Town adopting a more business-like approach to budget development. At a recent public forum, CAO Shawn Everitt spoke to a "private sector model", which will include zero based budgeting pilots for a couple of departments. This entails establishing service levels for those departments, determining the resources to meet those standards including the potential for new operating models or procedures, and then costing those required resources. This would be intended to increase effectiveness and efficiency within those departments, and could provide positive models to apply across other departments for 2021 and beyond.

Community Improvement Program - It has been proposed that a centralized pool of funding for community improvements be created, accessible to each of the nine municipalities by submitting proposals for approval by the County. There would be \$20,000 available for each municipality. It is not clear to us why each municipality would not simply create their own community improvement fund, but apparently the County wants to establish a centrally run program, adding another layer of administration for its management, review of proposals, disbursement of funds and tracking program impact. The most frustrating aspect for TBM is that the funding to create the County program will be raised through a new levy on Municipalities, proportioned by their share of the County taxes. For TBM, this will result in our contributing \$47,000 to the County fund, and yet we can only receive \$20,000 back for our community project. This does not seem to represent fair value for TBM!

Community Safety and Wellbeing Plan

There has been a motion to have the County lead the development of Safety and Wellbeing plans for the municipalities. There is some logic to this approach, as it will help to set standards across the County in some important areas of community wellness. It is not a perfect fit for TBM given that not all aspects of our community safety and wellbeing align with the County - we rely on the Collingwood Police detachment to meet our policing needs, for instance - but we support our participation in the program. However, the program's \$55,000 funding model was again skewed against TBM. Mayor Soever proposed an equitable approach, given all municipalities would receive roughly similar benefit from the creation of the plan, was to allocate a base \$5,000 to each municipality, and fund the remaining \$10,000 in proportion to share of County tax levies - 26% for TBM. His motion was however unanimously rejected with the vote being 17 - 1, so we will instead pay 26% of the \$55,000, \$14,300, rather than the \$7,600 amount he suggested. The extra \$6,700 is not significant in the larger picture, but it does align with the view that TBM is expected to consistently "step up to the plate" for the County.

So what can be done to help TBM realize a better deal with the County tax contribution? In an earlier article, the BMRA suggested a couple of steps that could be of value;

- 1) Help with our number one issue in the election campaign a year ago : Attainable Housing. This could take various forms - waiving of County Development Charges for these developments, or contribution of County owned land in TBM, if appropriate sites exist.
- 2) Work between TBM's Finance Committee and County staff to set a clear delineation of Sources and Uses of County Funds - we send \$15 million annually to the County and want to understand how it is spent and what benefit we gain.

Realizing progress on these activities will give us a much better sense of whether TBM is achieving fair value for our County tax contribution.

This is not to say that there aren't a number of big challenges to tackle. We have often mentioned that municipalities will be receiving reduced provincial grants. This will put a dent in our funding. The fact that the new Council was not really able to put its mark on the 2019 budget means that opportunities for efficiencies were not fully explored, and that will make the task of capturing efficiencies for 2020 more difficult - the hill will be that much steeper to climb. We continue to face what we've termed an "implementation gap" - funding has been set aside for infrastructure projects but Town staff have been unable to execute those capital investments. Should this continue, the capacity and functioning of our infrastructure will be compromised, and inflation in construction costs will raise the question of whether we'll have sufficient funding when the Town is ready to put "shovels in the ground". Also, there is no guarantee that we will be able to convince the County to reinvest a greater share of our Grey tax levies to help support our growth needs. And while progress on Attainable Housing is being realized, the cost implications for TBM budgets, as well as its impact on Official Plan density standards, remain to be determined.

All in all, a number of very important budget questions remain to be answered, and development of the 2020 plan over the next few months will bear paying close attention. We anticipate being able to provide a progress report in late November / December.

TBM PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT – MANAGING OUR TSUNAMI OF GROWTH

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With a new Council having been elected last year, and important changes implemented to the Town Planning department, there is a clear opportunity to hit a “reset” on how development is managed for TBM. Most of Council during the election advocated for strict compliance with the Official Plan and the “Sustainable Path”. We need to determine whether those principles and improved processes are being applied, and future development proposals better controlled.

The BMRA successfully performed our role as ratepayer advocate with previous Councils - BMRA fought and won changes to the current O.P. by eliminating bonus density, and established through the Ontario Municipal Board the “commercial land use designation” of Short Term Rentals - and we are committed to working with today’s Council in a similar fashion.

Why Planning issues are important to you

TBM residents place a high prioritization on effective planning, and have concerns that it has not been managed properly - understandable given there are over 60 current development applications representing approximately 1200 housing units and 3000 new residents. Issues of short term rentals, development site plans and commercial and residential land use zoning all play a major role in defining this community. All TBM residents benefit from the quality of life it offers, and all have a stake in keeping those qualities in place. In addition, each zoning issue and O.P. change may have significant effect on your property value.

BMRA current concerns:

- 1) Urging Council to meet its election promise to change the Planning process for early intervention by Council for informal review on significant developments. This is important because Council is often faced with refusing a development after considerable costs have been spent by developer and Town staff.
- 2) Wake Board Park application at Clark Street and County Road # 2 behind Fire Hall and Police Station is pending with a Public Meeting. This is strongly opposed on the basis of inappropriate land use, noise, traffic generation etc. The application lacks a study to determine highest and best use of the property, and the development condition of land exchange for re routing of Clark Street. This condition was imposed by previous Councils. If allowed to proceed the development will change the character of this Town. Wake board contests have already been refused by our neighbours Collingwood and Wasaga Beach.
- 3) Gibraltar Quarry: The pit operator wants to expand the pit operation to include future lands for extraction. The County staff and Town Planning staff provided opinion to approve. Former Town Council had said no to the application due to its impact on surrounding lands and vociferous objection of neighbouring residents and land impacts on area ecology and water issues. We need to confirm that the environmental impact of any expansion is mitigated to the greatest extent possible.
- 4) Council also needs to take action on demanding as condition of development approvals a “sunset clause”. Such a clause gives a set time limit for development to occur, failing which the approval is cancelled.

Other developments which are being closely monitored include:

“Aqua Villa” in Craigeleith at Hwy 26 and Longpoint road: A multi use project of dense residential combined with rental apartments, retirement home, and commercial area. Council was impressed with the developer’s development plan presentation of 14 January.

“McPherson Homes: development of large land parcel of 277 units east side of County Rd 19 and Craigeleith Ski Club development. Concerns have been expressed over density, traffic issues and short term rentals.

“Parkbridge” within same area as above but development of 211 units: concerns relate to traffic, density, short term rentals and drainage impacting downstream existing residences. This in appeal at present with Town support but opposed by neighbouring residents.

“Clarksbury” in area of Hwy 26 and County road #40 redevelopment of former subdivision main issue is access from County road. Nevertheless approved by Council including future road access over the Georgian Trail against vociferous objection of neighbours.

Now is the opportunity for the new Council and Town Planner to establish a more appropriate approach to planning that consistently adheres to the O.P., and grants exceptions only when a compelling case is made that provides benefit to TBM. Council must adhere to the principles espoused in the O.P. that projects must be compatible with surroundings in form and density.

ATTAINABLE HOUSING

Just as it is difficult to live a healthy life if you don’t have a roof over your head, so it is difficult for a community to be healthy without housing for a wide spectrum of the population. In the case of resort communities like The Blue Mountains, many tourism and service sector employees, seniors, and young families struggle to find suitable accommodation, especially rental housing. Rental housing for these groups has become the #1 priority of the Town’s Attainable Housing Corporation.

What is attainable housing? The term “attainable” was first used in 2010 by civic leaders here in the Town to describe the kind of housing, either rented or owned, that they felt was needed by young working families or individuals, or seniors on a modest income. The local demand for secondary homes and short-term accommodation has been an important factor that is pricing out this part of the population. The civic election in the fall of 2018 brought the issue to the attention of the whole community and a new council was elected with a mandate to scale up the operations of the Town’s Attainable Housing Corporation, so as to have a much larger impact on the community.

The Town is not legislated to provide emergency housing or social housing, which generally services individuals and families receiving income support and is the responsibility of Grey County. The Attainable Housing Corporation’s focus is moderate cost housing that is owned by the Corporation and protected from market forces in perpetuity. Currently the Corporation is looking for potential development partners and is seeking input on what financial incentives might be required in order to provide monthly rental rates in the \$700 - \$900 price range. These rents, if achievable, would be affordable to individuals earning annual incomes of \$30,000 - \$40,000.

Assistance from senior level governments including Grey County, as well as Town development fee reductions, will likely be required. The Town may also be able to contribute a building site. The Town has purchased the old Foodland site in Thornbury for this purpose.

The BMRA is supportive of the efforts being undertaken by the TBM Attainable Housing Corporation, assuming suitable location(s) can be identified, and will continue to track the progress being made and plan details as they become more definite. We’ll be looking for good building and landscape design, consistent with policies in our Official Plan that require compatibility with the character of our Town. There’s an opportunity here to demonstrate how a new project can respect existing neighbourhoods and natural features, while meeting an important housing need. That would represent a winning approach to addressing our need for Attainable Housing.

Keeping our Members Informed and Engaged

One of the top priorities of the BMRA is to ensure that our members are kept up to date on the key issues facing our town, and given the opportunity to voice their opinions. In the past, we have had challenges with the accuracy and completeness of our email list, and an outdated website. Over the prior six months we have;

- launched a new, much improved website (bmra.ca)
- spent significant time updating our email directory
- delivered a presentation at a Citizens Forum event in September

We will continue to monitor the effectiveness of our communications and member engagement programs - and we wanted to stress that if any of our members would like to submit content for potential distribution through our communication channels, we are happy to review and respond to all submissions.

JOIN TODAY!

The Blue Mountains Ratepayers' Association is growing in numbers thanks to many of you who keep abreast of the issues and support BMRA activities! Please don't forget to send in your \$25 and keep us the force we've become! New members and diversity always welcome!

We are actively seeking residential members as well as members from our agricultural community, corporate business, and small business. We are looking for committee volunteers with skillsets in communications, website and social media.

WHY BE A BMRA MEMBER?

- Strength in numbers = influence on government and community issues, paid membership is the proof
- Membership means you can bring issues of concern to the attention of the Association and perhaps find like minded support
- Represent the issues facing your neighbourhood or industry and make a difference
- While your Board are all Volunteers...
Website, Newsletters and AGM are costly: for effective and timely communication we need your dues!

**RENEW TODAY
ONLY \$25!**

PLEASE RENEW OR JOIN TODAY!

www.bmra.ca

Visit the website and click on JOIN NOW today!

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