



Turning the Page on 2020

We are all looking forward to getting past 2020, and entering a new year that will surely bring more positives than the last. While I share that thought, I have also been reflecting on how grateful I am to be living in the Town of Blue Mountains (TBM) at this time. Not that we have been able to avoid all of the negative health and economic impacts of the pandemic, but compared with other regions, we have fared better than most. I believe that is a reflection of the consideration and respect we have shown each other in our community during these difficult times.

This of course does not suggest we won't be facing significant challenges in 2021. In a recently published article, the BMRA identified our 5 top advocacy priorities for this upcoming year.

- 1) Management of Town Planning and Development that supports sustainable growth, and helps to ensure we maintain our quality of life.
- 2) Building out our infrastructure in support of our growth, and effective investment of our capital funds.
- 3) Responsible and prudent control of the Town's budget, recognizing that despite growing revenues, we are likely to face financial pressure from both the Province and Grey County.
- 4) Crafting an Attainable Housing strategy that addresses our community's need for housing that is within reach of those with modest means, creates designs that fit the local environment, and won't expose the Town to financial risk.
- 5) Continuing to work with Grey County to ensure that the Town of Blue Mountains receives a fair level of reinvestment of our Town's county tax levy back in our community. In this regard, we will share with our members the deputation focused on the need for improved operating efficiencies that the BMRA will deliver to Grey County Council in mid January.

BMRA Planning Update:

Can our community infrastructure keep up with the rapid pace of growth?

We're all aware of the ongoing stream of new development in The Blue Mountains. Construction is underway all over Town and there's a lot more to come. It's estimated that development projects to accommodate 4,000 new residents are in the approval pipeline. These are big numbers when you consider our permanent population is somewhere around 7,000 (2016 Census).

On top of this we have the impact of COVID-19. Based on the 2016 census, there are 3,206 dwellings that are not occupied by permanent residents. The pandemic has prompted many part-time residents to live here full time, and if this trend continues it could represent something close to an effective doubling of our population, with corresponding new demands on infrastructure and no new municipal revenues.

There are positive aspects to this growth - new development means jobs, customers for local businesses and tax revenues for the Town. But it also presents a major challenge: our basic infrastructure – everything from water and sewer systems, roads, sidewalks and bike lanes to public transit, recreation facilities, parks and community programs – has to keep up.

If our infrastructure and services are overwhelmed, we lose our quality of life. BMRA and many other neighbourhood groups and residents have raised these issues at countless Town meetings in recent years. While some might view these concerns as NIMBYism, we believe they raise legitimate questions about whether a small rural municipality like ours can handle large-scale urban development.

The good news is that Town leadership is now addressing some of our concerns. At a meeting sponsored by BMRA and Citizens' Forum on September 20, 2020, Mayor Alar Soever and Councillor Rob Sampson delivered a presentation on "Finances, Infrastructure and Capital Spending". They explained how the Town's financial picture, at least at this point in time, looks good. We have ample reserves and modest debt relative to many of our neighbouring municipalities.

But a closer look reveals much more to this picture. Our Town has a long history of under-investing in public infrastructure.

Upcoming Event – Save The Date: *BMRA Virtual Member Forum January 13th @ 5:00pm*

An opportunity to hear from our Town leadership regarding these priorities, and the initiatives they are planning to tackle them, will be presented at a BMRA virtual member forum that we have scheduled for Wednesday, January 13 from 5 – 7pm. The participants will be Mayor Alar Soever, Deputy Mayor Rob Potter, and Councillor Peter Bordignon.

Capital improvements that should have been completed years ago were neglected, so we now have a long and expensive list of road and water system projects for 2021-23.

Our capital funding relies much more heavily on development charges (DCs) when compared to other municipalities. These are one-time fees paid by developers on a per unit basis for permanent infrastructure development. A significant portion of our DCs is sent to the County. During the period from 2015 to 2019 Grey County collected \$6 million in development charges from the TBM and spent just \$1 million here in Town. We know the County has a 10-year plan to increase DC reinvestment in the TBM, particularly in support of our transportation system. But we have not seen any of these investments yet.

The bottom line is hopeful assumptions that “growth will pay for growth” are unsubstantiated, and we doubt they are applicable in our case. New demands on our already inadequate infrastructure are piling up fast, and that doesn’t include many much-needed new items on residents’ wish lists, such as more recreation facilities, bike lanes and walkways, public beach access, and transit options. We’re playing a game of catch-up, and an outdated arrangement with the County makes it very difficult to put investments where they are most needed.

This is why BMRA advocates for much better and more transparent decision-making that clearly connects our land use planning and development approvals to our real-world ability to build manage and pay for our infrastructure needs.

This starts with rigorous and comprehensive infrastructure planning. In their September 20 presentation Mayor Soever and Councillor Sampson summarized a long list of plans now being prepared. Examples include a Transportation Master Plan, a Master Drainage Plan, an Economic Development Strategy, a Leisure Activities Plan, and a Municipal Asset Management Plan.

This is critically important work, and we are fully supportive and encouraged by the efforts of Council and staff. It will give us essential information, including financial data, to make sure the pace of new development matches the Town’s ability to provide the required infrastructure and services. This is a fundamental principle of good land use and community planning. A goal of our Official Plan is “To ensure that all infrastructure, including sanitary sewers, water distribution and storm water management facilities, roads and municipal facilities meet the needs of present and future residents and businesses.”

We will be monitoring this issue carefully and looking to Council and staff to evaluate new development proposals as thoroughly as possible, using the most current information available. You can help too... If you have concerns about how new developments are impacting our infrastructure and services, you can contact Members of Council any time, or attend the Public Meeting for a specific proposal.

Contact information and meeting dates are listed on the Towns website at www.thebluemountains.ca.

Short Term Accommodations (STAs) ***Establishing a New Regulatory Model***

Early in 2021 the Town of the Blue Mountains will enact a new Bylaw to regulate and licence Short Term Accommodations (STAs), which are Airbnb type rentals. This will replace a set of regulations that are currently in place.

There are over 275 licensed STAs in Town located in various neighbourhoods. Some Zones allow them and some do not. Some that are allowed are in purposely built developments such as the many condominium units at the base of Blue Mountain, and in six Exception areas on the north and east side of Road 19, also at Blue.

Unfortunately, there are also a large number of STAs in areas where the Zoning doesn’t allow them (R1 Zone). They exist as the Town granted Legal Non-conforming (LNC) ‘grandfathered’ status on approximately 55 houses, based on their interpretation of the legality of their use prior to the first STA Bylaw.

The Town has now recognized that different areas and Zones need different rules and has proposed to create three types of licenses for STAs and one for B&Bs: A Type C licence would apply to the grandfathered units in the R1 Zones.

These areas with Type C licenses are our main concern: almost all of these businesses are totally surrounded by residential homes. We believe that special consideration should be given to these areas to stop the noise, parking and other issues the residents now endure.

The proposed Bylaw falls short in offering a true and permanent solution. In the 6 years under the current Bylaw not one license has been removed for infractions, no matter how many complaints a business incurred. It appears almost impossible to make an owner fully accountable for the disruptive behaviour of the renters they have allowed to be brought into the neighbourhood. Some of these rentals have occupancy loads up to 20 people.

The proposed Bylaw will offer some more protection, which we have long advocated, but don’t go far enough for Type C licenses. The Town needs a clear path to shut down troublesome behaviour in residential neighbourhoods. There is an administrative procedure to grant licenses and there should be an efficient and effective administrative procedure to remove them for bad management. They should enforce their ZERO tolerance policy for noise disturbances at STAs in residential areas. If you feel that residential areas in the town need more protection, please let your Councillors know.

Town of Blue Mountains 2021 Draft Budget:

Our Take

The BMRA Budget Review Committee performed an analysis of the TBM 2021 draft budget, and created a deputation that was presented at the Town Council meeting on December 8. This provides a summary of the points we made in that deputation.

Positive Points and Accomplishments

Overall, the Town handled the challenges of COVID-19 well:

- Identified numerous savings
 - Managed COVID-19 legal and bylaw issues, and hired part time staff to support enforcement
 - Tried to spend where needed to support the community and our business segment
- Staff elected to generously reduce TBM expenses by giving up the opportunity for bonus payments that had been approved by council in the 2020 budget.
 - We applaud the fact that Council targeted a zero per cent increase that TB residents will be paying on their 2021 tax bills.
 - Continually asked for broad public engagement via 17 different council committees
 - Trying to manage the continuing record municipal growth, with enhancements made to the Development and Engineering Department to better meet infrastructure project deliverables
 - Maintaining substantial financial reserves for the municipality
 - Hired a new Operation Director to bring a fresh look and improved management skills to the senior management team
 - Hired staff at fleet and transportation management position to make better use of these assets, and hopefully to reduce costs

Concerns and Potential Issues

Beyond these actions that we believe merited recognition, there are a number of areas where we would like to see improvements, or necessary shifts in priorities.

- While Council had targeted a 0% increase in property tax levies for TBM residents, due to the approval of additional budget items, there is now projected to be a 1.37% rise in Town taxes residents pay next year. Given the growth in new residential development and the extra revenue that provides the Town, we believe a 0% increase for taxpayers should be maintained.

- There appears to be insufficient fiscal restraint displayed during the current development boom of the municipality. A significant amount of additional revenue from increased municipal assessment taxes is built into budget 2021 (which projects a 5.2% increase in spending vs. 2020), but none of the money has been directed to reserves. We have become aware of other similar municipalities that have chosen to cap increased spending from the revenue generated by municipal tax growth.
- Seems to this point that the work to implement Zero Base Budgeting (ZBB) has been limited to implementing time sheets for Town staff. While we recognize this data will be necessary to effectively apply ZBB, the 2021 budget does not seem to identify areas where ZBB should provide budget "wins" – i.e. efficiency enhancements and opportunities to reallocate resources to areas of greater value or impact.
- An extended history of the inability of TBM to complete capital projects on time and within approved past budgets. Depreciation is greater than new capital builds and has been for some time.
- Failure to execute The Thornbury Wastewater Headworks project on time and within budget has been identified by the town's operations staff as a serious shortfall. BMRA has been told mitigation processes have been put in place so a repetition of faults will not occur again.
- No mention of the potential future budgeting demands from the Asset Management Plan, and the size of the infrastructure gap identified earlier by the 2014 Hemson study. We are seeing other Grey Municipalities struggle to fund infrastructure due to insufficient reserves, and this reinforces the necessity that our Town maintains proper reserve funds.
- No detail was provided of TBM costs expended to date in support of attainable housing. Town has purchased land, assisted in demolition and applied staff time. BMRA suggests there should be a budget page outlining Town expenditures and anticipated financial returns as this project will be included in the consolidated year-end financial statements
- BMRA is concerned about the increasing amount of municipal tax assessment dollars directed to County and not available for the Town to spend on needed capital projects such as a modern community centre.
- BMRA supports the Town's request for public engagement via numerous council committees. But the current number of 17 committees, many of which have struggled to gain traction in 2020, seems extreme – not clear how the town can manage the resources and tax dollars requested for these committees. In fact, the Town is proposing to hire an additional employee to act as an administrative assistant to

Committees. There is already concern about staffing levels at Town hall, as well as the expenditures projected for consultants in the 2021 budget.

- The BMRA survey also identified the high priority Town residents place on spending to attract health care professionals. We question whether the \$25,000 that has been allocated for these efforts in 2021 will be sufficient to meet our requirements.

The Budget Review Committee will monitor the budget development process to determine how the 2021 plan nets out, and whether the Town is able to address some of the concerns expressed.



Taking a Temperature Check: *Our December 2020 Member Survey*

The BMRA sent an opinion survey to our members in December 2020. We were very pleased to receive almost 200 responses. The full survey results have been posted on www.bmra.ca

We reviewed the substantial input provided to the open-ended questions in the survey, and summarized the key insights. Generally, respondents were supportive of the work done by Town Council and Staff during the first half of this Council's term, especially through the COVID-19 pandemic. There were however, a number of concerns consistently expressed.

1. Development Seen as Racing Ahead of Infrastructure

- "For me managing growth that respects the character of the area"
- "Council is approving too much new development, too quickly. Serious problems such as traffic congestion and drainage issues are being created. The character and natural assets of our community are being destroyed"

2. The Ultimate Plan for Attainable Housing isn't understood

- "Halt Blue Mountain Attainable Housing Corporation activities until a five-year plan has been drafted with public input and approved by Council"
- "Spend the money wisely. Get your 1st housing project off the ground without costing me money"

3. A Recognized Need to Receive Support from Grey County

- "The key issue for me is the imbalance of tax dollars going to Grey County. This will only increase with the growth of TOBM. Council must strive to make this a fair process for the TOBM and Grey County. Perhaps more Grey County dollars could be directed to the TOBM for infrastructure and other development projects to help offset the current imbalance"
- "We need to get our fair share back from the county"

4. Responsible Fiscal Management Must be Demonstrated

- "We most certainly have paid very high taxes to TBM for over 11 years and our dollars, we definitely expect, are being wisely managed!"
- "Based on the expanding property tax base I would like to see a reduction in the property tax rate"
- "Manage town budget and staff allocation with cost saving as priority"
- To summarize, we thought the following quote was representative of the general views being expressed;
- "Thank you for keeping us safe during COVID-19. Be vigilant about maintaining the small town charm in this community of communities."

Membership Matters!

The **BMRA** constructively advocates for responsible governance of our Municipality. Your volunteer Board of Directors and their committees apply their expertise to current local issues, reporting back to keep you informed. We provide a forum to voice matters, which are important to you and your quality of life in our community.

We appreciate the support of our current members and welcome new members from TBM neighbourhoods, agricultural community, full & recreational residents, corporate and small business.

BE Engaged, BE informed, BE Supportive...
BE part of our community association!
Please visit www.bmra.ca/join-renew