

THE VIEW FROM BLUE

Published by Blue Mountain Ratepayers' Association

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FALL 2015

BMRA Goals and Accomplishments

*Peter Bordignon and John Leckie
Co-Vice Presidents*

It has been a few months since our last newsletter but your BMRA Committees have not been sitting on their hands. We have had much Town business to follow and much discussion among ourselves on Council decisions. We offer the following commentary on the matters before the Town of the Blue Mountains, and refer you to the individual Committee reports that follow.

2016 Budget

Our primary Committee has historically been the Budget Review Committee. As you will see in the article prepared by that Committee, we are sounding alarm bells that the "blending down days" from the County are coming to an end, whereby increases in Town taxes are offset by County tax decreases. Therefore in 2016 you may see a blended tax rate greater than the 2% we have seen in the past, and by 2017 you may see significant increases in your taxes unless something radical is done. The final 2016 Budget will be presented to Council for approval in January 2016 and we will closely monitor and report on the Budget and continue to press for improvement on your behalf.

Over the past months we have continued to lobby Council on a change in the budget process so that they "build the budget based on previous year's actual costs", as this type of transpar-

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Townhouses along Highway 26 at Georgian Peaks

Councillor Martin has a saying: Does the Town recognize itself in its Official Plan (OP)? Developers should not be criticized for the Town's lack of enforcement of Design Guidelines (DGs) in the past. However, BMRA expects that the Town will enforce DGs more rigorously once they become part of the OP.

Planning and Development Committee

Brian Nelson and Janet Findlay, Co-Chairs

Official Plan Update

The recently revised Town of the Blue Mountains Official Plan is (hopefully) close to final approval. A review of the current OP was launched back in 2011 – some of you will recall public consultations during which BMRA and a long list of other local groups and agencies submitted comments. A draft OP, including all of the revisions recommended by staff and consultants, was adopted by Council in September of 2014 and sent to Grey County for review.

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Short Term Accommodation (STA) Committee Report

In 2013, the Town of Blue Mountains Community Policing Committee held an open forum on OPP services and the Neighbourhood Watch program in our community. At this meeting Ontario Provincial Police Detachment Commander, Inspector John Trude, publicly assured residents that no group of citizens in the Town of Blue Mountains would be discriminated against in terms of OPP services.

This past summer, in response to a number of resident concerns regarding disturbances at Short Term Accommodations (STA) properties,

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Ratepayers Take Note! Budget Review Committee

Terry Thompson, Chair

Your Budget Review Committee presented the graph on page 7 to Council, highlighting a 42% increase in Town costs over the past 5 years, averaging 8% annually. Some Councillors appeared both surprised and somewhat annoyed with this graph, but these numbers are factual, based on the Town's own published numbers.

The disconnect relates to the actual dollar increases in the cost of operating our Town versus the Budget presentations which tend to

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BMRA Goals and Accomplishments cont'd

ency would be beneficial to all those charged with approving and implementing budgets. We have also expressed concerns about the growth in staffing levels and are gathering more information in this area. We further recommended a budget workshop for Council and are pleased to see one now scheduled for December 14th, which will be open to the public for observation.

Finally, we have seen great success in the allocation of costs for water and wastewater services. The Committee has requested better transparency in the disclosure of water and wastewater operating costs for several years now, and are pleased to see that Council has approved a significant reduction in transfer charges to the user-fee-based wastewater system. We have been saying for some time that residents on Town water and wastewater services should not be subsidizing expenses that should be paid by all residents of the Town.

Grey County

The Warden says a \$13 million County office reno is "what the residents of Grey need and deserve". Gee, thanks Warden.

We are one of the few communities in rural Ontario that is growing. MPAC Values went up from \$2.7 to 3.6 billion over the last 5 years in TBM. That is an increase of almost a billion dollars in our balance sheet. That is the reason we are the "cash cow" to Grey County. It is also the reason why we need to invest in infrastructure to manage this success. Yet what is happening is that we are sending too much money to the County. They in turn are proposing to spend \$13.2 million on a renovation of County offices (which may grow to \$18 million or more once costs are finalized), despite the fact that most of the County is showing no growth. TBM

Ratepayers will pay for 27% of that.

Grey County returned to TBM half of the provincial funds of \$1,500,000 designated for our municipality. Our Mayor and Deputy Mayor were unsuccessful in obtaining the total amount, so the difference will now be spent throughout the County rather than in The Blue Mountains. Because the County voting process is weighted based on the number of electors per municipality, The Blue Mountains has little power in this assembly, although it pays roughly a third of the bills. Deputy Mayor Gail Ardiel has pushed for a change to a voting system weighted by assessment value, and BMRA is in full support.

There has been more success on the election issue of taking responsibility for road maintenance from Grey County. BMRA was behind the 2014 election campaign of John McKean who set out his vision for downloading County roads to the municipality. Now that he is Mayor, McKean has successfully stickhandled a proposal to download roads by August 2017. Will that proposal stay on track? It is hard to tell if the County will set us free.

We have a couple of options if they don't. "Withhold the cheque to the County" as the Mayor proposed during his campaign. Also we could withdraw from the County and become a "separated" municipality for municipal servicing purposes, along with St. Marys, Smiths Falls, and Orillia among others. That might mean contracting the County to perform certain services for a fee but we would be more in control of our destiny.

Short Term Accommodations (STAs)

This year was an important one in the implementation of the Town's STA Licensing By-law, as the phase-in of the new by-law was completed on June 1st. The BMRA's STA Committee closely monitored the work of the by-law staff and in some cases expressed

their frustration with the speed at which the staff was able to proceed, as well as the fact that some new provisions (parking requirements and occupancy loads) cannot be applied to STAs that are legally non-conforming. The Committee was also the catalyst for a meeting held this summer to clarify the OPP role in the enforcement of Town Noise and Parking By-laws with respect to STAs.

Bill 131, the Opportunity in the Sharing Economy Act, 2015

This Bill introduced by MPP Hudak would provide for individual residential property owners to share their property, provided certain conditions are met. Homeowners would be allowed to rent their houses or condos for up to 120 days a year without a municipal license. That in turn would have a huge impact on TBM's Short Term Accommodation as it would essentially cause us to backslide on progress made with regard to licensing and regulation. Efforts to halt this legislation are described in the STA Committee report.

Official Plan

The BMRA spoke out in August 2014 against the higher densities proposed in the updated Official Plan and appeared before Council again this year in October to address the most recent changes proposed by the County of Grey. We successfully called for a short delay and further review of the Official Plan. Our written submission, discussed in more detail in this newsletter, was the subject of a later meeting with the Town and County planners. Partly as a result, Council will look at a discussion paper in early January on density and bonusing. We look forward to Council's deliberation on this matter which is so critical to the future make-up of our community. On another front, we were pleased to hear that Ontario has passed a new law that will reduce the number of frivolous lawsuits often slapped on citizens expressing legitimate concerns in public debate. Called Strategic

BMRA Goals and Accomplishments cont'd

Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), the lawsuits were frequently and successfully used by developers to intimidate and silence people.

Open for Business

Service levels were the subject of a Citizen Satisfaction Survey conducted by the Town this year. We are glad to see that overall satisfaction with services was high (with 87% of respondents either satisfied or very satisfied with services overall). There was less unanimity (73%) with respect to how much value residents feel they receive for their tax dollars. BMRA is aware that a significant minority of residents (24%) feel they receive fairly poor or very poor value for their tax dollars and this fact is one that informs the positions and actions taken by the Association.

BMRA has drawn attention in the past to the need for the Town to adopt a more business friendly attitude and service levels. The Association fully supported a TBM reorganization of responsibility for development review and approval as well as increased staffing for this function.

As an example of "open for business" we have one of the biggest projects in decades under construction in Thornbury with Foodland, owned by franchisee Brian Leduc. Brian is expanding from 50 to 125 employees including 30 in his deli. He would like to have a modest digital sign that advertises his specials. But TBM is balking, waiting until they hire a consultant to give them advice. We think Council should be able to decide without consultants what is appropriate without turning us into a gaudy strip mall look. Next key Council Meeting, Mon. Dec 21st.

Speaking of consultants, TBM has hired consultants for the OP, the Strategic Plan, the Sign By-law ...on and on. We

think it is time for our elected leaders to risk some personal political capital and start making decisions faster. In other words lead.

The reason our values went up almost a billion dollars is because people are moving here for a reason...to escape the density of mega cities and to find peace and quiet in the tranquility of a magnificent geography. We don't need consultants to inform us of that. We need leadership to take the bull by the horns and make decisions more expediently.

Having said all that we hope that doesn't sound too critical because we openly admit our own internal frustrations with coming to a consensus. The fact is, we trust Council and Staff to be able to do more, faster and we appreciate the open dialogue that has transpired over the last year and trust it will continue.

The Sign Saga

If you like roses, you have to put up with the thorns. Here is a classic case of the difficulties of managing a small town that has big town tastes. We want it both ways.

The franchisee of the new Foodland store has requested approval of a computerized digital sign to advertise his ever-changing products. He says a digital sign is preferable to junk-mail-flyers. His sign can also be used to promote local community organizations and events. His is indeed a special case due to the number of people in his employment... 125, up from 50 in the old store. Also, his proposed sign does not appear to be gaudy or overwhelming. We already have a blue digital sign at the corner of Bruce St. and Hwy. 26. The Community Centre has a big digital sign. Home Hardware's sign is not digital but it has way more candle power than what franchisee Brian Leduc is proposing.

Your humble scribes in the BMRA have vacillated on taking a position on Foodland's proposed sign. As we

deliberate on the Official Plan (see concurrent article) we have come to realize how important it is to have a plan and stick to it, and not to get caught up in ad hoc changes. Ad hoc changes make for poor predictability, which is not good for business. The issue is complicated by the fact that the Town is preparing a new sign by-law to replace Sign By-law 2001-57.

Council considered the Foodland sign application on November 30th. It was defeated by John McKean, John McGee, Gail Ardiel and Joe Halos, with Ardiel and Halos being critical and commenting that it was not in keeping with our small town image. (We note that some councillors have supported the Windfall application now before the OMB with a proposed bonus density of 300% in twelve apartment units on 9 acres of land: small town "eh?") Gamble, Martin and Sequin voted for the motion supporting Leduc's sign.

We would comment that one jarring look at mega stores Home Hardware, the LCBO and Foodland (2 new gas bars on each side of the Orchid coming with goodness knows what kind of signage) tells us we have already made a decision on "the small town look" along Highway 26 (King St. East-Arthur St). So the sign and the big box stores are just the thorn to go with the rose of big town retailing.

Finally, the recent Business Retention and Expansion presentation by TBM led by Deputy Gail Ardiel was a tremendous success in terms of turnout and for the most part the content. Business is expanding. Development has doubled in 2015 to a record \$100 million. Lots of good news. It would have been helpful if they had started off with clear demographic analysis. They did marry transit to affordable housing issues but more work needs to be done to find housing for small business employees, i.e., deal with NIMBY re apartments and secondary suites etc.

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## STA Committee, cont'd from 1

several BMRA-STA Committee members met with the Community Policing Committee, Town By-law Department Staff, Police Services Board and the OPP. Our purpose was to clarify the OPP role in the enforcement of Town Noise and Parking By-laws. Residents should be aware that the Noise By-law is in effect at all times of the day and night.

Residents were particularly concerned that they would be required to call a Responsible Person employed by a STA owner or operator to deal with noise or parking issues, or disturbances at the rental property. Since our meetings, both the OPP and Town By-law Department have again confirmed that residents impacted by STA operations will not be required to call the STA operators' Responsible Person to deal with complaints. The OPP's commitment to all residents for addressing any disturbances is firm, as Detachment Commander Inspector Trude's responses to our recent questions regarding OPP services indicate:

**Q: OPP seem to give warnings re: noise issues, and not ticketing, even though owners and renters have signed the rental agreements which included their first warning. What is the feedback of the OPP?**

**A:** As with any law (Federal, Provincial or Municipal) the Officer has discretion which is used in every instance, depending on the situation. It is a dangerous precedent to set that in all instances, charges will be forthcoming – as you can't apply that condition to one By-law and not another. Reports are required to be submitted in all instances of Noise complaints wherein the Officer is required to advise of the person spoken to, the situation when they attended, and the action taken (or not taken, as the case may be).

**Q: OPP are not to advise the renters as to who called in the**

**complaints or drive to their home after approaching the renters, re: the very real potential of threats and retaliation; a phone call could suffice. Do you concur and how will this be communicated to the Officers and the process upheld?**

**A:** Yes – I do concur and this is the case, unless the complainant specifically states they wish to be spoken to at the time of the Officer's attendance. This has been advised to all Officers by Detachment Policy, and all Sergeants are aware as well. As a result of this question, all of the responses made herein will be forwarded to all Shift Sergeants/Supervisors and the #2 persons in charge to ensure all staff members are aware. There are still many situations occurring where the complainant does not identify themselves, or specifically states that they don't wish to go to court or testify, they just want the noise calmed down. In those instances, we will still attend and advise of the complaint and caution under the Noise By-law, but cannot charge (under the Noise By-law) as Police are not inhabitants of the area (see next answer).

**Q: Residents are willing to go to court however, is this necessary or do the Police Officers only need to testify?**

**A:** Residents are required to go to court to testify that they were disturbed by the noise level. Higher Court decisions have long held that the Police cannot be disturbed, and as this By-law requires that an inhabitant of the neighbourhood must be disturbed, that testimony is required to indicate that the complainant was disturbed.

A) Police cannot initiate a disturbance complaint.

B) The By-law requires that it must be an inhabitant of the neighbourhood who initiates a disturbance complaint.

C) Testimony is required by the complainant. However, testimony is only required if the accused pleads "not guilty" and requests a trial date. If the accused

person does not appear or simply ignores the ticket process, the matter just becomes an administrative process and no trial occurs and no testimony is required.

**Q: Will the OPP actually call the business Responsible Person if the OPP are contacted by a resident re: noise?**

**A:** No – the OPP will respond to a call for noise, and take appropriate action. We will communicate information to By-law [Department] on request if they wish to follow up with the Responsible Person – but that is a municipal policy and not a part of the By-law that we can enforce. The OPP cannot become part of the administrative process.

We thank Inspector Trude for providing the above clarification to residents, and the Community Policing Committee for their presentation to TBM Council in September. At this presentation, CPC Chairman Larry Hall reviewed effective community safety practices and advised Council that "By-law Enforcement Works" in dealing with community disturbances.

If you are experiencing disturbances in your neighbourhood, you are encouraged to call the Town of Blue Mountains By-law Department (519-599-3131, ext. 249) or the OPP Non-Emergency number (888-310-1122) for assistance. A noise or parking complaint made to a STA Responsible Person is not reported to the Town so no By-law Officer investigation, penalty or demerit points occur.

For more information regarding Short-Term Accommodations in the Town of Blue Mountains, please check the Town website's Frequently Asked Questions and By-laws.

### Bill 131 and the STAs

Earlier in the month Mayor McKean had called us to alert us to the issue of a proposed Bill to allow private households to rent their properties without a license for 120 days a year

## STA Committee, cont'd

or less. The Mayor then brought this matter to the November 16th meeting of the Committee of the Whole (through a copy of a Ontario Good Roads Association November 12th memorandum, supporting the proposed Bill). At that meeting Mayor McKean noted particular concerns with the notion of unregulated home sharing and its impact on the municipality's Short Term Accommodation program and the broader community.

Deputy Mayor Gail Ardiel told the BMRA about her meeting in Toronto on Friday November 27th with AMO (An Association of 450 Municipalities in Ontario). She said she rose up at a plenary session to inform them of the backsliding implications of Bill 131 on our STA situation. She said everyone seemed surprised with that news and that she got AMO support for her concerns.

We are confident the Town is now fully on the case. Michael Benner, Director Planning & Development Services, recommended at the November 30th Council meeting that the Town prepare a response to "Bill 131" from Mayor McKean to MPP Hudak with copies to Premier Wynne, MPP Wilson and Grey County municipalities.

BMRA has contacted our MPP Jim Wilson whose Executive Assistant has assured us that as House Leader of the Opposition, he will deal with it (although we haven't seen anything yet). We suspect that the PCs were flat footed with the STA implications.

All Ratepayers should be concerned. Email Wynne and Wilson.

As Councillor Michael Martin said from the outset, we think this Bill 131 provision may be stopped, but let's keep giving it visibility as stranger things have happened with dumb legislation accidentally going through.

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Planning and Development Committee

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Town and County Planners are now working through a last round of comments from various stakeholders, and will be submitting a report to TBM Council in December with options and recommendations for final changes. Council will decide which revisions to accept before approving a final document. This will go back to County Council for approval, followed by a 20-day appeal period before the revised Plan can become "Official". This is expected to happen in early 2016.

At close to five years and counting, the process of revising an OP is slow and tedious. This is due in part to the large volume of public comments that had to be systematically documented, reviewed and at least considered in the revisions. But the process is also remarkably bureaucratic. The full document, now weighing in at some 300 pages, is complicated and packed with jargon. Those of us crazy enough to follow these things are constantly asking why it can't be streamlined and simplified, only to get answers that are even more complicated and packed with jargon.

The challenge for ratepayers is that, regardless of how complicated and downright boring the whole OP process might be, it can have a dramatic impact on development and land use across the Blue Mountains, and that includes your back yard.

With that in mind we've been trying to stay plugged in to the OP marathon, and it hasn't always been easy. John Corrigan, a representative of the public on the OP Steering Committee, has worked diligently to help keep BMRA and others in the loop, even though that Committee is now inactive. Long-time planning consultant and TBM resident Dave Slade has been very helpful by sharing some of his

valuable knowledge, while at the same time making submissions of his own. Councillor Michael Martin, a former municipal lawyer, has been available to answer questions from the public and listen to our concerns.

There are a lot of good things in the revised OP: Examples include criteria aimed at making new development more compatible with the character of existing neighbourhoods, provisions for secondary or community plans, and updated policies for rural and agricultural lands. A handful of issues, however, remain unresolved. BMRA has taken the position that it's well worth the extra effort during this last round to do what we can to eliminate any problems before the revised OP gets a final stamp of approval.

We've zeroed in on four outstanding issues that we believe should be resolved before the OP is finalized. We're counting on Council to have a careful look at each of these, and ultimately to approve the best possible Official Plan. Here's a quick rundown:

1) Density and Bonusing

The one message that Planners hear constantly from residents is that we don't want any radical changes to the density of development in our neighbourhoods – in other words, no big, ugly buildings jammed up right next to the low-rise communities where most of us live. We count on the planning process to make sure that new projects are compatible with what's already there. For most of us this doesn't mean that ALL density increases should be prohibited, but it certainly means that any increases should be modest, buffered, and carefully designed to respect the character of surrounding homes.

We've become increasingly concerned about dubious provisions for "Density Bonusing" that were in the old OP and somehow migrated into the new one. Bonusing is a tactic whereby

Planning and Development cont'd

developers are allowed to exceed density maximums in return for some community "benefit" – typically cash. It is used more commonly in large urban areas and typically restricted to something like 20% over the maximum density. For some reason there is a history in TBM of using Bonusing extensively and allowing very large increases – in some cases a doubling or tripling of the permitted maximum. These provisions were carried over into the revised OP including, most alarmingly, NO upper density limit for Bonusing deals in Thornbury-Clarksburg.

The whole idea behind Bonusing is questionable, and this extreme use of the tactic makes no sense at all – it renders the stated density maximums in the OP virtually meaningless, and makes it impossible for any property owner to know what's really permitted in their area.

We are asking Council to remove all references to Bonusing in the revised OP. If the Planners come up with a sensible approach to Bonusing with real benefits for the Town, they can propose detailed guidelines for possible adoption through an Official Plan Amendment, following a review by the public and Council.

We're not alone in questioning the Bonusing provisions. The County has requested that TBM prepare and adopt Bonusing Guidelines. Serious questions have been raised by members of Council and experts like Dave Slade. Planning staff are now reviewing all density policies in the revised OP, including Bonusing provisions, and will be proposing options for Council to consider in December.

Our recommendation is clear and simple – defer Bonusing until someone thinks they have it right and can

demonstrate that to the public and to Council. This is a risky area, with the potential to create a wide-open density policy that is directly opposed to the broader intent of the revised OP, not to mention repeated messages from the public to Council over many years.

2) Height Control

The basic approach to height control is to carry forward the same maximum height that we have in the current plan – 11 meters, or 3 storeys. This would be tempered by other policies like the compatibility criteria mentioned above that are intended to prevent abrupt height changes in established areas. 'Sounds reasonably straightforward, doesn't it?

Not quite... There is a clause in the old Plan and recommended for the revised Plan that would allow the maximum height to be exceeded if (you guessed it) the Town and a developer agree to a Bonusing deal. Again, we are asking that this clause be removed, along with all of the other references to Bonusing.

OFFICIAL PLAN

The Official Plan describes the Town Council's policies on how land in The Blue Mountains should be used. It helps to ensure that future planning and development will meet the specific needs of the community. The Official Plan (O.P.) Five-Year Review was adopted by the previous Council in September 2014 and is now before the County of Grey, the approval authority that acts on behalf of the Province.

DESIGN GUIDELINES

Council in 2012 adopted Community Design Guidelines to provide design guidance to developers and consultants in designing new development, to landowners when undertaking site and building improvements and to Town staff when reviewing applications and designing municipal projects.

'Seems like a no-brainer to us, but we will see...

3) Design Guidelines

In March of 2015 BMRA submitted a formal request for a policy in the revised OP to require developers to have due regard to the Town of the Blue Mountains Community Design Guidelines that were adopted by Council in 2012.

The rationale is that these Guidelines are the result of a public process and they represent the best statement we have of basic principles of good design – things like matching the scale and massing of existing historic buildings on Mainstreet commercial areas, creating safe pathways for pedestrians and cyclists, and paying attention to whether building details respect existing character.

The intent isn't to control all of the subjective elements of design, but rather to push for a better, more thoughtful and rigorous approach to design in all projects. See our front page picture. We're trying to encourage buildings and spaces that truly respect and enhance the special qualities of our local built and natural environment – the things we all love about our area – and discourage more of the same-old-same-old architecture imported from the GTA.

There's plenty of precedent here. Other local policy documents such as Our Sustainable Path are referenced in the revised OP, and many municipalities around Ontario have established design guidelines. Town and County Planners agree with our request, with some additional wording to allow for improved or more specialized guidelines in the future. We expect Council to agree too.

4) Short Term Accommodation

Since day one of the OP review an objective has been to make sure that all OP policies are consistent with the intent of the Town's existing STA By-law.

Planning and Development cont'd

We concur, and in this case have requested that staff and Council double-check some wording in the relevant section of the revised OP (B2.5, for those who are interested). We are seeking clarity of where STAs will and will not be permitted.

Overall, the next few months should prove very interesting for OP watchers (we know you're out there!). We're anticipating some key decisions by Council that could have a major influence on planning and development for years to come. You will find the Draft Official Plan as approved by Council in September 2014, on the Town's website.

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**Please pass this on to your neighbours and encourage them to join the BMRA**  
[www.bmratepayers.com](http://www.bmratepayers.com)

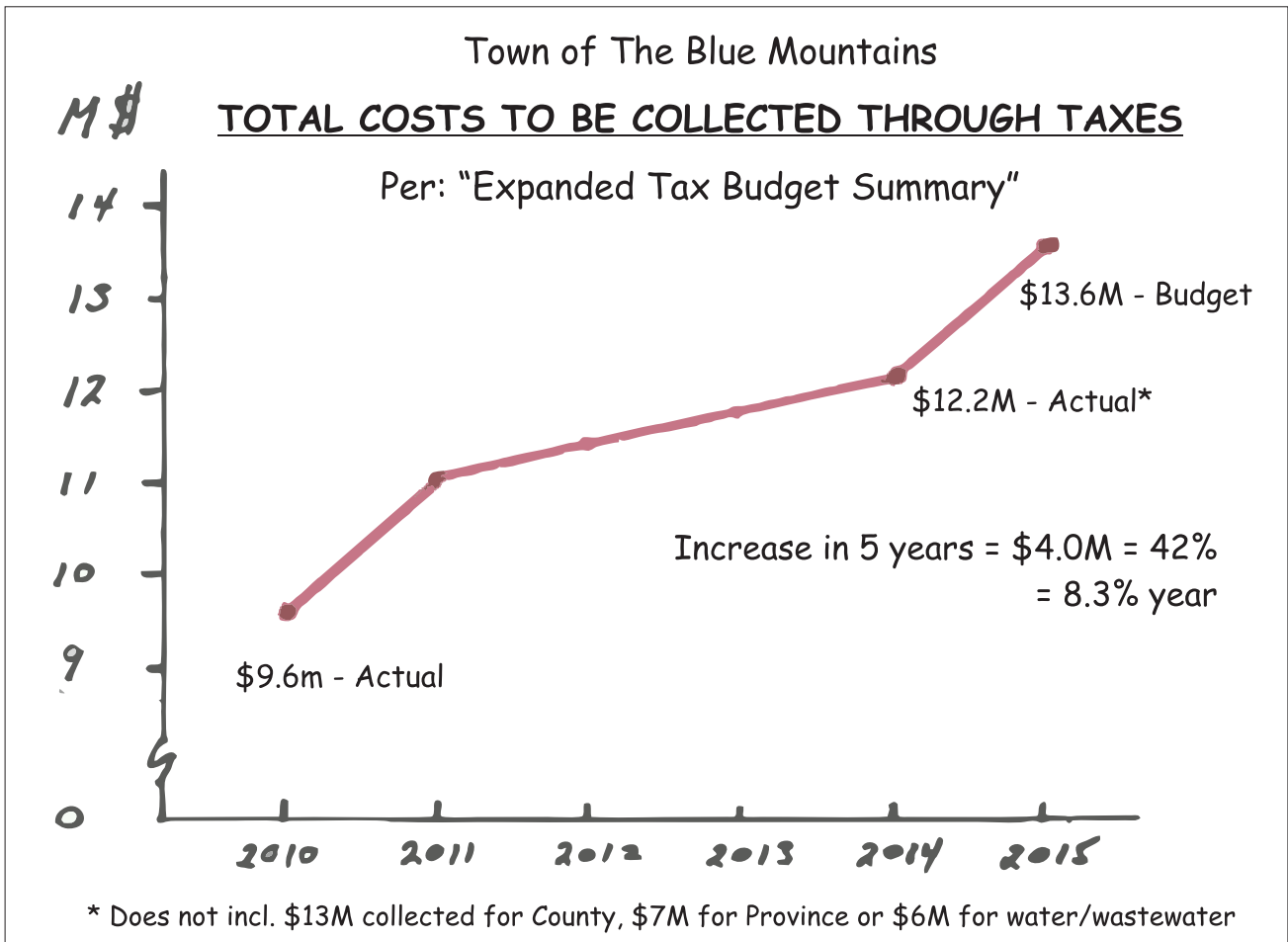
**Budget Review Committee** cont'd from page 1

emphasize the "blended rate" and has normally shown much more modest increases, in the 2% range. Again however, such modest increases in the Budget numbers are after "blending in" a reducing County and Education levy and after an MPAC adjustment.

It is important to note that TBM assessments have grown much faster than other municipalities in Grey County. This results in our being the 'cash cow' for the County, paying 27% of the total County taxes with only 8% of the population. For example, total MPAC Assessments for the Town have grown from \$2.7 billion to \$3.6 billion over the past 5 years or on average \$180 million per year. This translates to approximately \$650,000 in annual levies based on the Town's mill rate. The Municipal Act requires that the proceeds from such MPAC levies reduce Municipal mill rates such

that they are revenue neutral to the Municipality, however, this amount can effectively be spent without moving the Town's mill rate up from the prior year's level, even though the actual spending has gone up by the \$650,000 in this scenario.

We acknowledge some of the increases are a result of cost elements that Council cannot control, such as higher police, fire, snow removal expenses and reduced Provincial Grants. We give Council credit for trying to control costs they are responsible for, given the problems and inefficiencies inherent in the present budget process. We do however note that staff salaries make up a large portion of Town costs. From 2005 to 2015 (budget) staffing levels have increased 38% with costs budgeted for \$8.3 million in 2015, up 72% from the \$4.8 million in 2005. We are gathering further information



## Planning and Development cont'd

in this area as the rate of growth in population has been at a much more modest level. We do know that some Councillors have suggested reviews of Town operations for organization and efficiency but these have not been supported by senior management to date.

We requested that Council consider modifying the budget preparation process to start using actual costs (or Estimated Actual). This would stop using the previous year's budget as the base point, as this process incorporates any surplus and inefficiencies into the new budget. While Finance staff understand our position, clearly no change will be made unless directed by Council.

Finance staff is planning to have a "budget workshop" for Council on December 14th and this will be open to the public for observation. Your Committee recommended this workshop when we met with staff earlier this year and are pleased to see it taking place. We have also spoken to several Councillors and encouraged them to move towards a change in the process to "build the budget based on previous year's actual costs", as this type of transparency would be beneficial to all those charged with approving and implementing budgets. We encourage Council to adopt our recommendation to modify and modernize the process.

Looking forward to 2016, the Proposed 2016 Budget is now available on the Town website. We congratulate staff on keeping Town costs, so far, to a modest 2% increase over the 2015 Budget as requested by Council earlier in the year. Council has not yet reviewed the budget and in the past many "enhancements" have been added to push costs up in the final approved

numbers. We hope this will not happen this year. In addition there will be a 1.94% increase in the County levy next year, versus 7 years of modest County decreases, based on the County Budget that was passed November 24, 2015. A major expansion and renovation of the County office building in Owen Sound is in the works, initially estimated at \$13 million, with some estimates indicating \$18 million may well be the number. While some Grants may be given to the County, The Blue Mountain's share of this expansion will be about 27%, so longer term much larger increases in the County levy can be expected. Our share of overall County levy to lower tier municipalities, at 27%, is totally out of proportion to our population of approximately 8%; however, the formula is predicated upon total MPAC Assessments as noted earlier.

The increase from the County in 2016 at 1.94%, when combined with the Town cost increases, when finalized, may well see blended tax rates greater than the 2% we have seen in the past. The final 2016 Budget will be presented to Council for approval in January 2016 and we will closely monitor and report on the Budget and continue to press for improvement on your behalf.

### **Water and Wastewater Budget:**

The W/W budget process is similar to that of the Town Budget. In 2015 the fixed Water and fixed Wastewater rates were held flat and we anticipate that the same will be reflected in the 2016 Budget.

Your Committee have requested better transparency in the disclosure of Water and Wastewater operating costs for several years now and are pleased that Council recently approved a new policy developed and recommended by staff for "Inter-functional Transfers" which will see a reduction in annual Wastewater transfer charges of \$193k and an annual increase of \$11k in

Water transfer charges, however both will be implemented over a 5 year period.

Your committee is also pleased to note that staff completed an Asset Management Plan for Water, Wastewater and Roads and we await the plan for other Town assets, expected to be completed by year end. We continue to monitor the cost of Water and Wastewater services on a regular basis with particular attention to the use of the replacement reserves which should be held and dedicated for Water and Wastewater infrastructure replacement.

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*Call for membership info, or visit
the website and click on
JOIN NOW today!*

You are important to us and we value our relationship with you as members of the BMRA. We share information, opinions and provide news on various issues of concern in The Blue Mountains.

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