

Date: Wednesday, April 9, 2025

Meeting Type: Committee of the Whole

From: Niall Loble, CAO, Michael Benner, Director Development & Infrastructure

Subject: Hybrid Planning Service Model with Grey County

Report#: DEV2025-034

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Recommendation

That Council indicates support in-principle for a hybrid service delivery model for Grey County with Georgian Bluffs as a participant and,

That staff be directed to share such support with Grey County staff prior to May 9th, 2025.

Background

There are four public bodies that provide planning support, regulation and approvals within the Township.

- The Niagara Escarpment Commission (NEC) is the principal authority for all matters within its development control area and regulates under the policies of the Niagara Escarpment Plan (NEP) to guide planning decisions.
- The County of Grey, as the upper tier municipality, is the principal authority for all planning matters across Georgian Bluffs, guided by the policies of the Grey County Official Plan.
- The Grey Sauble Conservation Authority is the principal authority for all matters within its regulatory areas and is guided by provincial regulation.
- The Township of Georgian Bluffs, through delegated authority from the County of Grey, is the principal authority for matters as directed by its Zoning Bylaw (across the whole Township, less areas of development control by the NEC) and within settlement areas (excepting for plans of subdivision which are County responsibilities) as guided by its Official Plan. The Township's (and County's)

Official Plan Policies are largely implemented through the Townships zoning bylaw.

When a resident in Georgian Bluffs wishes to undertake a development, they must seek the approval of the relevant principal authority, which differs based on where they wish to develop and what they are looking to do.

Frequently, the principal authority will seek comments from the other relevant agencies before rendering a decision in support or not of a development proposal. So, while for many applications, there is only one principal authority or decision maker, frequently more than one of the public bodies will provide oversight comment and input.

Public bodies employ Planning staff (or use consultants) who are able to review applications for completeness and work with applicants to try to encourage development within, or close to, conformity with policies of the Township, County, Conservation Authority, NEC and higher orders (such as the provincial Planning Policy Statement) government, in their applications.

In some instances, where an application meets the policy requirements, staff provide approvals. In instances where applications do not meet policy requirements, various public bodies may grant variances from policies to enable development. These variances are often provided by elected representatives through Committee of the Whole, or Council processes. In some instances, regardless of the nature of application and its conformity with policy, the support of Council is needed, such is the case with subdivision applications which require County Council approval.

Within Grey County and its nine lower tier municipalities, there are a variety of ways in which planning approvals are managed and, within this system, applications are frequently dealt with by multiple planners working for public bodies within the Grey County area. The lack of consistency across Grey County and the nature of development can lead to multiple planning staff at multiple different public agencies reviewing the same application, against that organizations planning policies and providing comments on the same application from differing perspectives and slightly different interpretations of the same policies

This can create challenges:

- 1) It can lack transparency and clarity leading to confusion with applicants in knowing who is reviewing their application and what policies apply; where commenting roles apply and where ultimate authority lies.
- 2) It can create confusion over who the principal authority actually is. (I.e. residents often assume the Township is the principal authority when, in fact, County policy takes precedence.)
- 3) It can create duplication of roles; equally qualified planners in multiple organizations might view applications and provide comments on them.

- 4) It can create delays and add expense to the planning process as each review carries costs, costs which are often passed onto the applicant.

The province has, increasingly over recent years sought to eliminate red tape, increase efficiency in planning decisions and drive down areas of duplication. For example, it was previously the case that Natural Heritage planning matters which were from a policy context embedded within the County Official Plan, would have been reviewed by the Conservation Authority. The province has mandated that this stop, to seek to eliminate potential duplication and gain efficiency – the County now employs and holds responsibility for natural heritage and ecological reviews.

The province is encouraging further refinements and streamlining of planning, to address these issues, speed up approvals and allow for more development, more quickly and at lower costs to developers. Many provincial policy changes have resulted from this desire.

In addition, the current system requires each public body to have planning competency and capacity – staff – to support the work. Over recent years, as the focus on development has grown, demand for planning staff has soared; there is more demand for planners than there are planners. Municipalities often struggle to attract and retain planning staff; a challenge which becomes exponentially more impactful on municipalities, such as Georgian Bluffs, that requires the expertise, but does not have volume to justify a full team of planners; Georgian Bluffs requires the expertise of long range policy planners, natural heritage planning expertise, subdivision expertise, consent application expertise, but does not have the volume of work to sustain planners in each of these areas as a larger team would. This means that for a municipality like Georgian Bluffs, we are seeking highly experienced planners that can do all planning work; and these highly experienced planners are challenging to find, attract and retain for a small municipality.

For Georgian Bluffs, this has resulted in a long-term planning vacancy, now entering its fourth year. Georgian Bluffs relies on its Director and a team of consultants to support planning functions for the Township, an approach which works, but lacks long term sustainability.

This challenge is not unique to Georgian Bluffs and several Grey County municipalities have found themselves challenged in attracting and retaining planning staff. As a result, several Grey County municipalities have planning vacancies, and several rely on external consultants for a range of planning services from consent applications to policy and long-range planning processes.

Analysis

The pressures that were being experienced collectively across Grey County have been a source of frequent discussion between lower tier municipalities and the County for

some time. With increasing provincial focus on making planning policy and legislative change to expedite planning approvals in place, during 2023 and 2024 discussions seeking to explore alternative ways of address the provincial mandates around planning and seeking to address these challenges were held.

This resulted in a review of other jurisdictional areas and an initial concept of uploading of planning functions of lower tier municipalities to a single planning team at the County was proposed - a centralized approach. This was discussed by all Councils and Georgian Bluffs provided support for this. However, support was not expressed by all nine lower tier municipalities, with several noting some concerns, and The Town of Blue Mountains noting opposition to this approach, and indeed, to any change to regional planning service that would move functions outside the Town's own staff team.

For the Town of the Blue Mountains, and indeed for some other municipalities, the existing demand for planning services means that they are able to support multiple positions within their own teams and are able to provide a suite of planning services, frequently with cross over to other teams such as parks teams, engineering teams and building teams with whom planning functions overlap. The concern around loss of local control and these internal relationships, means that moving toward further centralization of services at the County does not necessarily deliver benefits to these municipalities.

Given the mix of support, Grey County recently shared an update to the potential model, sharing a potential hybrid approach. This would allow for municipalities that were keen to explore shared services where the County provided planning for all municipal functions, to continue while others would remain on their existing service model with both local and county-based services.

The hybrid proposal (as with the initial proposal) changes the staffing of planning, but makes no change to the approvals; staff, where supported and where policy was met, would retain approval over some applications, as they are today, Committee of Adjustment and local Council would continue to be the approval authority for applications under local policy, and the County would continue to approve applications as needed; in short, local approval authority would remain as it is currently, but staffing would be delivered by the County.

Furthermore, under the proposed hybrid model, municipalities would continue to see local planning support, in municipal offices, where this was seen to be advantageous. This would result in County planning staff being available within municipal offices, in communities across Grey County, delivering service, in person. For some municipalities where consultants (and indeed some staff) are working fully remotely, this would provide an in-person opportunity to engage with planning staff that is an enhancement to existing service levels.

The proposed hybrid model has advantages for Georgian Bluffs, as did the centralized approach:

- It would provide residents and staff access to a planning team of expertise – expertise in long range, policy planning, ecological and natural heritage planning, as well as other planning matters would be on hand for Township residents and staff to deal with.
- Minor applications could be reviewed by junior planning staff, while more complex applications could be reviewed by more senior planners; the appropriate skillset for the nature of application could be dedicated to that application.
- It would provide efficient review of applications – regardless of the principal authority (County or Township) one planner would handle the applications. There would be no need for multiple sets of comments between applications, providing efficiency of handling of applications, and clarity in an application's potential success and information requirements.
- The model would provide for redundancy; when a planner was on vacation or unwell, or during periods of position vacancy, the wider team would provide back up and support – i.e. where services would currently be unavailable, under a hybrid model, there would be a back up.
- When development pace increased, there would be additional planning staff that could be brought into support; and, when planning activity was decreased, then planners could be reallocated to other areas experiencing increases – or, to other tasks, such as policy development and updates.
- It is anticipated that attracting and retaining staff within a team would be easier than as an individual municipality – staff would find themselves within a team where they can learn from colleagues and develop, explore varying elements of planning over time, or specialise in planning as suits, and within a team that offered potential growth and professional development opportunities. The Township has heard from past planners that this has been a primary reason for them moving on and the wider team, in a hybrid model would address this issue and concern.
- The proposed model would retain a local zoning bylaw, the relevancy and control over the Official Plan and would leave approvals as they currently are.
- A planner would be available, in Georgian Bluffs administrative offices to service community needs on an as needed basis establishing working relationships with the existing staff team and being present and available to respond to resident and developer questions as needed.

Planning is a revenue generating element of municipal business under the basic concept that growth should pay for growth. Planning work includes both revenue

generating activities such as permit and application receipt review and approval, and policy work such as zoning bylaws and official plan development. For Georgian Bluffs, historically, around 30% of planning costs have been recovered through planning fees; staff have noted that in 2025 new fees have been introduced with a desire to increase recovery rates as per Council direction in respect to cost recovery in the User Fee Policy. In addition, the Township has, for several years, relied heavily on consultants where the degree of cost recovery may be less than if these services had been able to be rendered in house. For some Grey County municipalities, cost recovery of greater than 70% has been achieved.

It is not anticipated that moving to a hybrid model will necessarily reduce overall costs, though it may see a shift in costs from tax supported services to a balanced approach where costs were more fully recovered from applicants. The hybrid model shows a similar overall number of staff as there are currently, assuming current vacancies are filled. However, through efficiency gained, it is hoped that there will be a lower reliance on consultants and that the proportion of costs recovered from fees will increase.

The primary benefit of migrating to a hybrid model is in service delivery, service clarity and service expectations. There will be a consistent team dealing with planning applications across a wider area; developers will come to know and work with planners and establish relationships, and residents will have access to local planning specialist knowledge. Applications will be more efficiently processed with savings on review time. Through area reviews of planning fees, there will be consistency for residents and developers in fee schedules and it is likely that anticipated efficiencies will result in a better balance between user fee recovery and tax base borne costs.

There are potential challenges with a migration to a hybrid model. The Township would be reliant on the County in providing services and as such would rely on a partner to ensure adequate resources were available to meet Township needs. Costs would not be directly able to be controlled as they are currently; the County would become responsible for staffing and for setting planning fees – there would remain a fee for service beyond planning fees for the non-cost recovery elements, which would need to be budgeted for as an external pressure with the Townships annual budget. And, as with all significant service delivery changes, there are likely to be unanticipated costs and challenges in the short term, during migration.

Likely the largest challenge yet to be determined is that much of the efficiency improvements can only be realised at a critical mass of participation by lower tier municipalities, something over which the Township has no bearing or control. As noted in this report, the Township currently has a diversity of demands for planning services which it is not able to effectively address as a small team. A minimum number of participating municipalities will be required to participate in a hybrid model to build a team which has capacity and breadth of experience to be able to deliver these services in a more efficient way.

Given that more precise details of the nature, scope, expected efficiencies, costs and challenges of a hybrid model rely on further work exploring this, many of these answers are not yet fully understood; while, based on experience of others and on the background work to date, it appears very likely that a hybrid model will be of benefit, these benefits are not yet fully understood – nor the potential downsides.

Engaging the next step in the planning requires more dedicated staff time to work through potential hybrid models and, in order to justify this work, the County is seeking to understand, based on the potential challenges and opportunities as understood today, which municipalities would be interested in further exploring a hybrid model, with some conviction that if, as believed, a hybrid model offers potential efficiencies, that the municipality would then participate in the new hybrid model. As much is yet to be understood, this commitment would be revisited as information came to light but would allow staff to explore in some details with an understanding of the likely volume of work, resources and participating municipalities, if efficiencies can be found.

Given all of the above, it is anticipated that the County Shared Planning model, if initiated, would not come into force until mid to late 2026.

In the meantime, staff are planning to try once again and recruit a planner in 2025 to reduce and offset reliance on consultants. There is potential to explore sharing a planner with another municipality in advance of any future, potential, hybrid service. If successful in attracting a planner, discussions on potential hybrid models would be shared prior to a job being offered. It is expected that the Townships currently vacant planning position would, in a hybrid model, be reallocated to the County as part of the wider team. Therefore, any job offer made prior to conclusion of the County conversation would note the potential for employment realignment in the future.

Financial Impact

None, at this time. It is expected that some staff time will be allocated to exploring the model if the recommendation is adopted. Staff will continue to work on the basis that a hybrid model should be delivered within the existing resources of Georgian Bluffs – staff and budget.

Strategic Lenses

Enhancing Service Delivery: Excellence in Every Interaction

- Ensure service delivery efficiency by continually striving for efficacy through service reviews.

Enhancing Environment & Infrastructure : Building for Today and Tomorrow

- Continue to plan for sustainable growth ... review Official Plan and Zoning Bylaws and planning for future servicing
- Ensure in all that we do we are planning for Climate Change, supporting green development standards.

Workforce Development: Investing in People

- Grow team capacity
- Implement professional development that seeks to support future Township growth
- Ensure employee attraction and retention remain priorities and support successional plans that support sustainability.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging

One of the key benefits of the hybrid model for Georgian Bluffs would be the potential to attract and retain local professional planning staff. Over time, staff become not only part of the community but are able to provide high quality of services based on experience and knowledge of the area that are rooted in local understanding. This supports not only the individual sense of belonging, but also allows for a planning service responsive to local needs.

Truth and Reconciliation

Relationships with Saugeen Ojibway Nation are a critical part of planning and development. Establishing, building and maintaining effective working partnerships have significant potential to be enhanced through a hybrid model. Not only does such a model offer greater potential consistency of staffing leading to improved relationships, but the streamlining and efficiencies within the planning process will allow for more effective support and engagement with Saugeen Ojibway Nation on planning applications and proposals.

Climate Change

Grey County is leading a number of region wide climate initiatives including consideration of a 'green development standard' or a future ready development standard. Such standards will hold more value when consistently applied across the area. This will more easily be achieved if there is a single team responsive to planning that is aware of the programs, initiatives and potential incentives that could drive development which is more climate aware.

Conclusion

Council participated in discussions in respect to a centralized service and, with questions, indicated support for Georgian Bluffs being considered in further discussions.



The support of Georgian Bluffs was mirrored by some, but not all Grey County municipalities and so a revised approach to see a hybrid model that would enable some municipalities to participate in centralization of planning services while others retained a tiered approach has now been proposed. Municipalities have been asked to express interest in being included within a hybrid model to enable staff in Grey County and participating municipalities to further explore the model, see if it is sustainable and identify the efficiencies it could generate. Staff are recommending that Council provide support for the next stage of discussions. Should a hybrid model be proposed for implementation, Council will retain the ability to select to participate or not, at a later date.

Respectfully Submitted: Niall Loble, CAO & Michael Benner, Director
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