



Published on May 23rd, 2016 | by Barbara MacKay

## Blue County?

The Town of the Blue Mountains (TBM) is looking at ways to get more value from its considerable tax base. One consideration is to leave Grey County and become an upper tier of its own. It's not a popular idea at County Council.

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At a Town of the Blue Mountains council meeting earlier this month, council approved spending \$20,000 this summer to investigate the opportunities and challenges of going upper tier. It's the most extreme notion yet to come from TBM's long simmering dissatisfaction with its relationship to the County.

"It's not a new idea," John McKean, Mayor of the Town of the Blue Mountains says, "It's been kicked around at a number of committees." McKean says it boils down to a dissatisfaction with the "inequity of how much we're paying to the County compared to the services we receive." What's at issue is "the structure of how taxes are collected" McKean says.

TBM represents 7% of permanent population of Grey County, 13% of the number of households - and pays 26% of the tax levy. TBM was created in 2001 during the amalgamation heydays. It's population is roughly 7000 and it comprises Thornbury, Clarksburg, Kolapore, Ravenna, several private ski clubs and notably Blue Mountain Village Resort. While the permanent population is small - the tourist dollars are huge.

"The sooner they support Grey County the better it will be for everybody," Grey County warden Al Barfoot says. "The nine municipalities [that comprise Grey County] are like one big family." He thinks that TBM is being selective in its complaints about County cooperation. "our financial staff can show how they've been getting their money's worth but they seem to cherry pick the years that they have not received against the ones where they have," Barfoot says.

The Warden says the idea of TBM separating from Grey County is a long shot that would have to be approved by the other eight municipalities, plus the Ministry of Municipal Affairs. "It is not supported by Grey County."

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But it's a deep vein of dissatisfaction or at least one that is tapped frequently at TBM council. Last year, for instance, Gail Ardiel, TBM deputy mayor proposed that instead of using a system weighted by population, the municipality with the most money should have the most say. "the County's vote system [is weighted] by the number of electors" she said and it would be better if it were "changed to a weighted vote system by assessment." She took the notion to County Council and it was voted down 16-2.

The TBM Mayor himself now speaks of an un-weighted system (one person one vote) and points to Bruce County as an example of this. And both the TBM Mayor and Deputy Mayor are opposed to spending County money on renovating the existing County Administration building in Owen Sound. They would like to see some decentralization, for example, moving social services to unused school space in Meaford or a relocating the County Administration building to a more central location, such as Markdale.

Indeed, scratch many Town of the Blue Mountains politicians and you'll likely hear phrases such as "tax inequities" and "cash cow." And it's not just council. John Leckie, vice president of the Blue Mountain Ratepayers' Association, speaks strongly in favour of TBM cutting loose from the deadweight of Grey County. On the Mayor's Facebook page, for instance, he says, "We are in a competitive world and need to smarten up. ... we spend our Ratepayers' money on bureaucracy. A recipe for failure. Time to exit the County and invest in success."

But if complete secession is not viable, the county is not entirely opposed to some changes in the relationship.

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Last year, says Barfoot says, Grey County council passed a motion to "look into the feasibility of transferring control and maintenance of County roads that are in the Blue Mountains to that municipal government."

The TBM suggested the idea could even be a pilot project that other municipalities could consider. According to McKean, there is no provincial mandate for a County to have a roads departments.

"Roads are easiest place to start," McKean says about greater independence. "We're already in the road maintenance business," he says. The municipal trucks, sanders, plows for example, travel the same roads, but just don't plow them. "We [TBM] have the expertise to do this now," McKean says.

The roads proposal that is now under consideration by County suggests that the TBM would take ownership of about 82 kms of road including several bridges. TBM would take ownership of the Clarksburg yard and would complete the resurfacing of Cty Rd 119. It would also expect the County to transfer 26% of transportation reserve to TBM (several million dollars).

The municipality expects that this roads deal would ultimately save the TBM over \$2 million, at the current level of service.

"We're focussed on roads right now, we want to take them over by August 2017," McKean says.

As for exiting the County completely, McKean says there is a lot to consider. The expenditure of \$20,000 this summer is for staff to brainstorm what services are missing from TBM to be upper tier and what it would cost to provide these, for example social services. He expects they will have more information to work from by the fall.