



SHAPING GREAT COMMUNITIES

PLANNERS
URBAN DESIGNERS
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS

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Town of The Blue Mountains
Planning and Building Services
26 Bridge Street, P.O. Box 310
Thornbury, ON N0H 2P0

Attention: Shawn Postma
Planner II, Town of The Blue Mountains

Dear Mr. Postma:

**Re: Peer Review Brief
Proposed development at southeast corner of Victoria and Napier
Thornbury Community**

GSP Group is pleased to provide this Peer Review Brief to the Town of The Blue Mountains in respect to the proposed development at the southeast corner of Victoria Street and Napier Street in the Thornbury Community. GSP Group has been retained by the Town to provide a peer review of the proposed development concept for the subject site, given that GSP Group was involved in the preparation of the Blue Mountains Community Improvement Plan and the associated Planning, Urban Design and Sustainability (PUDS) Strategy.

Based on our authorized scope of work, we have organized the Peer Review Brief into the five sections, as follows:

- A summary of our understanding of the subject site and the proposed development;
- A summary of any neighbourhood design policies in the Town's Official Plan that are relevant to the proposed development;
- A summary of the direction in the "Greenfield Design Guidelines" within the PUDS Strategy as it would apply to the proposed development;
- A commentary on our main observations concerning the proposed development; and
- A summary of our peer review and key points for the Town to consider as part of the approval process.

1. Our understanding

The Town of The Blue Mountains has been working with the applicant concerning a development concept and a Site Plan Control process for an approximately 4.3 hectare (10.8 acres) site located at the southeast corner of Napier Street and Victoria Street in the Thornbury Community. The applicant is proposing a 97-unit multiple residential development consisting of single storey attached bungalow townhouse units. The development is targeted as an adult lifestyle community with units generally around 1,400 square feet in size and centred on a private recreational facility. Principal access for the proposed development would be from Napier Street, as well as secondary access from Victoria Street. A stormwater management facility serves the proposed development at the northeast portion of the subject site, at the intersection of Napier Street and Victoria Street.

GSP Group's role in this Peer Review Brief is to assess the higher level and structural elements of the proposed development, with the intent of providing an external perspective on the application. In undertaking this role, GSP Group reviewed the following materials and plans in formulating their commentary:

- The Town of The Blue Mountains Official Plan (2007);
- The PUDS Strategy (February 2010);
- Proposed Development Sketch;
- Conceptual Elevation drawings (February 2010); and
- Conceptual Landscape Plan (February 2010).

2. Official Plan Policies

The Town of The Blue Mountains Official Plan (2007) does not contain a specific section that is devoted to design objectives or policies, but rather, generic urban design matters and related policies are dispersed throughout the Official Plan in the general development policies and in separate land use designations. This lack of a higher level policy direction on design matters was a primary observation of the PUDS Strategy. Given this, the PUDS Strategy recommended that a *"stronger urban design position should be incorporated into the Official Plan, providing a high level approach for urban design across the municipality"* consisting of a *"framework of objectives or principles should be established in the Official Plan for all municipal decisions regarding urban design or development, whether it be public or private"*.

In terms of general development policies, there is little in the way of design direction for new residential neighbourhoods or developments currently within the Official Plan. The following are applicable to the subject property:

- Section 3.2.5 identifies that *"detailed Concept Plans and Master Development Agreements shall be prepared to coordinate the development of large or multiple land holdings"* for large residential projects.

- Section 3.10 identifies that *"landscape amenities shall be preserved and enhanced wherever possible to ensure maintenance of the visual quality and open landscape character of the municipality"* which is to be *"a major factor in the consideration of new development proposals"*.
- Section 3.10 further identifies that landscape plans are required for major development proposals and are to *"incorporate existing vegetation and additional plantings, with particular regard for site amenities, buffering and the creation of an aesthetic streetscape"*.
- Section 3.20 identifies that the maximum building height in the municipality is generally 11 metres (3 stories), and that a variety of building height are encouraged to provide visual interest and variety.
- Section 4.27.1 identifies that the intent for the Thornbury Community is the maintenance of *"the unique small town feel and character of the community"* which is to be *"an inherent feature of all new development forms"*.
- Section 4.27.2 identifies that the residential areas within the Thornbury Community are intended to accommodate a range of low, medium and high density residential types.

Specifically, the subject property is designated "Residential" under the Thornbury Community land use policies contained in Section 4.27.3.1 of the Official Plan. Generally, the intended density for townhouse dwellings in the Residential designation is 25 to 40 units per hectare. Townhouse dwellings are directed to areas with close access to collector and arterial streets. Furthermore, townhouse dwellings are to include *"sufficient buffering"*, whether through plantings, separation, fencing, or other measures, with the intent of limiting *"potential land use conflicts with adjacent land uses and to appropriately screen the development from roadways while ensuring compatibility with the visual character of the community"*.

3. Greenfield Design Guidelines

The purpose of PUDS Strategy (finalized in February 2010) was to provide a comprehensive and coordinated framework that will help the Town guide future decisions related to physical improvement in the three commercial areas of Thornbury, Clarksburg, and Craigleith. As part of the overall guidance, the PUDS Strategy included a comprehensive set of design guidelines for a variety of different topics or themes, which included new "greenfield" developments on the several large undeveloped blocks generally in the west end of the Thornbury community. These guidelines are intended to provide "mid-level" guidance for design within the planning process, operating between the general policies and principles of the Town of The Blue Mountains Official Plan and the specific details and plans of the development review process.

Of note, the subject property is not within the study area of the PUDS Strategy, the boundary of which extends no further than Alice Street to the south. Furthermore, the PUDS Strategy, including the design guidelines, have not been adopted or endorsed as yet by Town Council. Understanding this, the below provide a summary of the key considerations in the Greenfield

Design Guidelines as they would apply to the proposed development were they to be in effect. Relevant guidelines that could be applicable to the subject property include:

- Locating street and development blocks to incorporate existing quality hedgerows into side or rear lot lines or along linear pedestrian corridors;
- Using a connected pattern of arterial, collector, and local streets that is linked to existing street connections in adjacent neighbourhoods;
- Designing the street pattern so that development blocks are between 200 and 250 metres in length to promote movement permeability and connectivity, or providing mid-block walkways where blocks are larger than 250 metres.
- Using “single-loaded” streets for local streets adjacent to arterial street right-of-ways to act as a “window” in to the neighbourhood;
- Designing stormwater management areas as green “amenities” within a neighbourhood, and not solely “utilities”;
- Connecting stormwater management ponds to the overall greenspace network through pedestrian and cyclist linkages;
- Varying the elevation types along a single street to enhance the visual interest and variety of the streetscape;
- Using a variety of roofline types along an individual block and along the entire street to enhance the visual interest and variety of the streetscape;
- Wrapping porches around the building façade on corner units;
- Designing corner units so that the side of the dwelling unit is treated similar to the front façade in terms of continuity of materials, colour, and window placement;
- Using increased height and massing, highly articulated façades, wrapped façades and porches, and enhanced fence design for “priority” lots within the neighbourhood; and
- Locating prominent community buildings or uses at key locations, such as at the termination of streets or at neighbourhood gateways.

4. Commentary

Based on the limited design direction provided by the Blue Mountains Official Plan, the guidance provided by the Greenfield Design Guidelines, and urban design “best practices” for new neighbourhoods, we offer the following eight (8) comments on the proposed development on the subject site:

- (1) **There is a need for a more comprehensive “master concept plan” for the entire block bounded by Napier Street, Victoria Street, Duncan Street, and Bruce Street.**
Section 3.2.5 of the Official Plan provides the direction for undertaking such a block master plan exercise. The principal comment concerning the shortcomings of the proposed development concept plan is the lack of connection with the adjacent properties on the

block: the proposed development is isolated from these properties. At a minimum, a master plan concept for the block bounded by Napier/Bruce/Duncan/Victoria should establish the principal public streets, parkland, natural features, land uses, pedestrian linkages, and unit types within the block, which will ensure the block will function as a "neighbourhood".

For example, we note on the development concept plan two streets on the adjacent panel to the east which terminate at the site boundary. Do these streets have status? Are these public streets that should be extended through the subject site? If not, how will a connected street system be created to provide safe and convenient access in this area?

Particularly noteworthy in this regard is that the subject parcel of land is but one of the several largely undeveloped blocks to the southwest and west of the Thornbury core where such exercises are warranted at the outset prior to the submission of applications for subdivision and development of small parcels. Past precedents in the surrounding area appear to have occurred on more of a piecemeal basis, with little regard for the overall development of the entire block. In the future, we suggest the Town consider should exercises for other blocks in the surrounding area to ensure the main "structuring" elements of the block are established prior to detailed site design.

- (2) **The proposed development concept turns its back on the bounding public streets.** The subject site's frontages along both Victoria Street and Napier Street are entirely rear lotted in the proposed development concept which is in direct contrast to the houses on Napier Street which all front the street. This reverse lotting is the principal issue with this concept and very much anti-urban in form. The traditional urban form upon which Thornbury is built requires houses to front streets to create attractive, active and safe streets.

We would strongly recommend that along the Napier and Victoria frontages all units should be oriented to the street and there are two ways in which this could be addressed. Firstly, garages could be accessed from the internal private streets but with front doors and porches facing the public street. Alternatively, units could have both garages and front doors accessing the public streets, as is the case for the existing houses along the streets. If the latter, the design needs to ensure that the garages do not dominate the streetscape.

- (3) **The proposed development concept is entirely inward looking with no connections, pedestrian or vehicular, to adjacent properties to the south or east.** This form of development pattern is contrary to neighbourhood design best practices which strive to ensure connectivity for various forms of travel as well as permeability of movement through public street network. Future road connections should be accommodated between the subject site and the adjacent undeveloped properties on the block. Connectivity may warrant a local public road on or abutting the subject site, or at the very minimum, walkway connections should be provided to adjacent properties. These issues all relate to comment #1 addressing the need for a master plan concept for the entire block to ensure that it develops in a coordinated and connected fashion.

- (4) **The conceptual elevations provide little in the way of variety and visual interest along the streetscape.** The use of a single elevation type would create an overly repetitive, sterile and environment offering little in the way of architectural interest and variety. Particularly, the proposed conceptual elevations contain extensive roof areas with little articulation that break up these planes, presenting a potentially imposing visual presence along the streetscape. Thornbury is a traditional town with a variety of architecture, materials and colours along its streets, which is in stark contrast to this proposal of uniform design along its 400m of public street frontage.

Variations in the elevation for the townhouse blocks can be created through a variety of techniques, including changes in the colour or orientation of materials between each townhouse block; the addition of roof articulating elements such as dormers; and a non-repetitive pattern of heights or emphasis at key features on the façade, such as building entrances. As part of the site plan approval process, several elevation types should be provided to ensure variety in the visual landscape, particularly given comment #5 below concerning priority units.

- (5) **The “priority units” in the proposed development concept, from a neighbourhood design perspective, should have a higher level of elevation design, articulation and detailing.** Priority units are those units that given their specific location or context in the overall development are highly visible and represent focal points within a neighbourhood. Priority units deserve a particular emphasis in terms of articulation, massing, and detailing to ensure they appropriately reflect their prominent locations in the neighbourhood. We would suggest three different types of priority units exist in the proposed development concept: gateway units; corner units; and open space units (see the following page for illustrative purposes only as we suggest a redesign of the site).

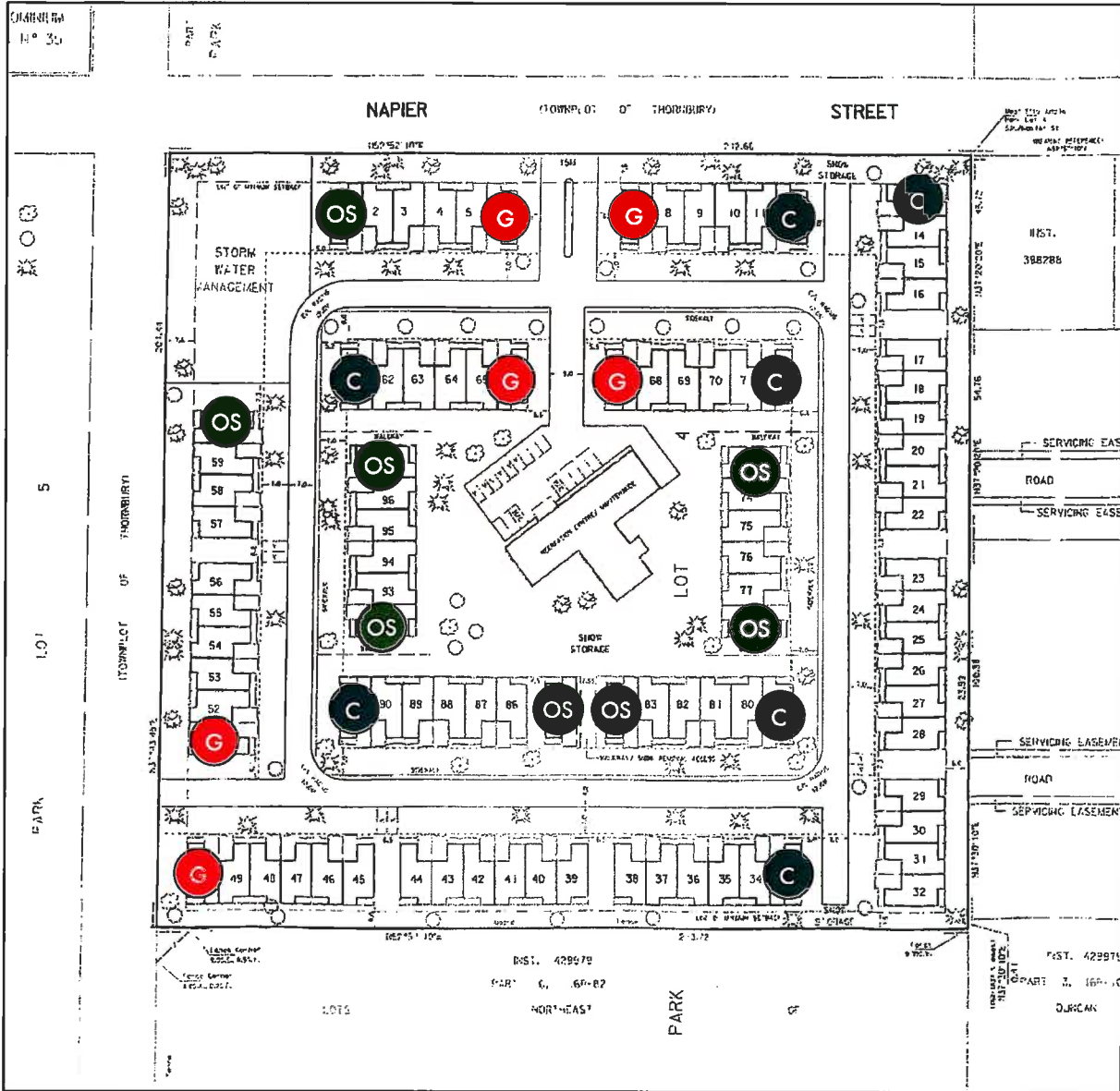
Considerations for the elevations of priority units should include: providing similar side elevations to that of the front elevation in terms of detailing for units publicly visible on two side yards; using increased height and massing; incorporating enhanced fence design for the sides that are publicly visible; using increased height and massing to emphasize the unit; wrapping porches around the building façade on corner units; and using different materials and colours to differentiate the units.

- (6) **The stormwater management facility, given its prominent location at the intersection of Napier and Victoria, presents an excellent opportunity to showcase the development.** The emphasis on this facility should be a “usable” greenspace that provides a naturalized open space function as well as a utility function. Key considerations for the design and incorporation of this space into the overall neighbourhood should include small seating areas for casual resting areas; native plantings surrounding the facility to naturalize the space; decorative fencing should be required; and a neighbourhood signage feature to punctuate the corner intersection.

It appears that this is a private SWM facility to service only the townhouse development. In the context of the overall block development (comment #1), the municipality may wish to provide one comprehensive SWM pond to serve the entire block (or a larger area) in order to provide a comprehensive and efficient water management solution.

- (7) **The private recreational facility has the opportunity to be a prominent building within the neighbourhood in terms of the view corridor from Napier Street.** As a potential “landmark” building within the neighbourhood, consideration should be given to orienting the building to terminate the vista from the entrance street from Napier Street, and orienting the parking to the south of the building. Additionally, consideration should be given for aligning the architectural features on the building with this terminating viewline, possibly with enhanced detailing or features, such as through enhanced massing and height or through a unique design element such as a tower. Again, such a treatment has the potential to showcase the development and provide a distinct identity for the neighbourhood. A further alternative may be the location of the recreation centre along Napier Street, near the intersection of Victoria Street and in conjunction with the SWM pond.

- (8) **The hedgerow on the adjacent property to the south of the subject site presents an excellent opportunity for screening and maintaining the natural heritage on the block.** From the aerial photograph, the hedgerow appears to be substantial and in good physical condition. Consideration should be given to maintaining this natural feature which requires all buildings and grading on the subject site to be set back from the dripline and root zone. Further, a sensitive design of the landscape treatment and fence details for those units that back onto this feature is required. Additionally, there is an opportunity to incorporate the hedgerow as a linear park or some type of trail linkage through a master plan concept as identified in comment #1 above.



- G Gateway units
- C Corner units
- OS Open space units

Figure: Suggested priority unit locations

5. Summary

The challenge in presenting this Peer Review Brief is the relative lack of design direction in the form of Official Plan policies: the Town's Official Plan is relatively silent on the components and considerations that comprise vibrant, visually interesting, connected and healthy neighbourhoods. Through the PUDS Strategy GSP Group identified suggested amendments to the Official Plan to provide the municipality with stronger direction in regards to key urban design principles, objectives, and policies that facilitate better overall neighbourhood design.

Notwithstanding the above, we based our assessment on generally accepted neighbourhood design practices gathered and employed in our considerable experience. In general, the development concept does not implement principles of good urban design, particularly in the context of the traditional urban form of Thornbury and the relationship of the development to the public streets. In our assessment, we have suggested that the main points the Town should consider for the proposed development concept are:

- Consider a more coordinated development approach for the larger block in terms of the major elements that comprise a neighbourhood and how the various land parcels will be integrated;
- Ensure units front onto Napier and Victoria Streets;
- Look to refine the conceptual elevations to provide more visual interest and differentiation along the streetscapes, particularly concerning units in priority locations;
- Consider emphasizing the two facilities (SWM and recreation facility) as key landmarks in the neighbourhood.

We hope that the above assists the Town in evaluating and refining the proposed development concept. Should you have any questions or require clarification regarding any material within this Peer Review Brief, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours truly,

GSP Group Inc.



Kevin Muir, MCIP, RPP

cc: Glenn Scheels, GSP Group