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**Subject:** Attainable Housing

### **Open Letter to the Town of the Blue Mountains – Attainable Housing**

Under their Attainable Housing initiative, the Town of the Blue Mountains is exploring options to provide attainable housing for average/medium income households who can't afford to buy or rent in our municipality. This is a worthy goal that will ensure a socially diverse community that will enrich our community and our workplaces.

The Town recently purchased the former Foodland property on Highway 26 in Thornbury as a possible site for this housing. The Town has said one of the reasons they picked this site was because of its proximity to downtown Thornbury and public transit. The Mayor explained that some of the residents in this housing wouldn't have a car so they would need to walk or ride transit to shop and work.

However, the selection of this specific site for attainable housing raises several concerns.

The obvious concern about the Town's criterion of being close to a transit line is that, of course at present, we have no public transit in Thornbury. Currently there is a partnership with the Town and Collingwood that provides public transit services from Collingwood to the Craighleith area, including Blue Mountain Resort. And while this transit line has proven successful, it is unclear whether the expansion of this system to Thornbury proper is warranted or even feasible.

It is also unclear what proportion of future residents of attainable housing will not own a car. The Town has decided to focus on those with average/medium incomes not a low-income demographic. On the surface it seems somewhat inconceivable that any average income household would not own a car. The Town must study and share relevant information on car ownership for this income group before making any transit expansion decisions.

But even if some residents of attainable housing do not own a car, it is likely many will. Building multiple housing units with access only from Highway 26 in Thornbury will further exacerbate the ever-growing volume of traffic through town. Most residents in the Town of the Blue Mountains accept, because of the bottleneck through town at Bruce Street, traffic problems in Thornbury are a necessary fact of life. But it seems unwise to worsen the problem if we don't have to. A site almost anywhere south of Highway 26 in Thornbury will provide multiple routes to downtown and locations both east and west of town.

One proposal for the Highway 26 site includes retail space on the ground level of the housing complex. It has been clear over the years that opening a retail business in Thornbury can sometimes be a risky venture, especially for those not on downtown Bruce Street. We have been fortunate so far in avoiding an influx of chain stores and box stores. The popularity of our

town is partly due to its unique village charm and to preserve that we must be cautious with future retail spaces. Instead of our predominance of small business operations, retail space on this site may only be financially feasible for chain stores, fast food outlets or even adult stores and tattoo parlours.

Lastly, many consider the \$1.6 million price tag for this small property and building too steep and as the site is currently unserviced the town will need to put in sewer and water if high density housing is built here. The Town must ask itself if this the most fiscally responsible option to pursue.

In looking for solutions, one option the Town may want to explore is as follows:

Our Town Hall is currently at capacity. Council is considering leasing offsite office space to house some of its overflow staff. While this may be necessary in the short-term, it doesn't necessarily have to be a long-term solution. A few years ago, the Town provided funds for Beaver Valley Outreach to purchase the former Piper's restaurant and the BVO has since renovated it to create offices, meeting rooms and the small Treasure Shop. Why not offer the old Foodland Building to the BVO, and then relocate some Town staff to the current BVO (Piper's) building?

This has a number of advantages. First, relocated Town staff will be right across the street from Town Hall. The BVO parking lot at the former Piper's will give the Town more parking spaces and perhaps help alleviate the on-street parking problem on Mill Street. Another benefit is the old Foodland building could possibly remain intact and, with some renovations, house the BVO. The currently crowded and cramped Treasure Shop would have more space and ample parking on this site. Further, this building could remain on its current septic system, at least for now, which could make it more fiscally attractive for the Town.

Unfortunately, the Town is only asking for public input on the concept for their "Gateway Attainable Housing Project" on the old Foodland property. Rather than merely asking for comments on the façade of a project on this specific site, the Town should instead be asking the public whether the old Foodland site is the most appropriate location in the first place. To ensure the decision for such a significant project is transparent and in the best interests of all residents, it is very important for the Town of the Blue Mountains to fully explore alternative options for an attainable housing site and seek input from the community on all available options. Just because the Town purchased the old Foodland site, does not mean it is the best choice.

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**Regards,**

**Tom Kritsch**