

RESPONSE TO BMVA 2018 CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE
ALAR SOEVER CANDIDATE FOR MAYOR



Town of The Blue Mountains Election - 2018 Candidate Questionnaire

Thank you for giving all the candidates an opportunity to answer these very important issues for the tourism sector and our community. This is the kind of engagement that is a vital to working together to manage the rapid growth that we are seeing in both the tourism sector and our community at large.

If I am elected as Mayor, I look forward to working with you for our community.

Alar Soever
Candidate for Mayor

Supporting Tourism Industry & Role of Blue Mountain Village Association

a) *What initiatives would you support to grow, improve and protect the tourism economy & to help communicate our history and planning, economic impact, and the benefits & value we bring to residents' lifestyles, property values, etc.?*

Our natural environment and proximity to the Toronto area, as well as the world class attractions that have been developed, have led to the growth of our tourism sector, and made our area an attractive lifestyle choice for residents. This has led to unprecedented growth and provided economic benefits for our community. There has however been a lack of effective communication as to how the tourism economy adds to the liveability of our community. Currently there are 66 development units (4,828 units) at various stages of development in our Town and the tourism is growing at an unprecedented rate. Together, the tourism industry and the Town need to manage this growth so we preserve what makes our Town the popular destination that it is, as well as a liveable community. What is needed is a collaborative approach between the tourism sector and the Town to highlight the enhancements the tourism industry has brought to the community, and how it contributes to the economy and to the liveability of our community. For the Town, this means putting more of a focus on communication through its website and publications advertising things to do. For the tourism sector this means more visibility in the community through sponsorship of things in the community like Music in the Park, events at the Library etc.

b) *How would you organize & finance such initiatives?*

Minimal additional tax funding is required for the Town to upgrade the position of Economic Development & Communications Coordinator to a Senior Management Team position, to hire someone to fill the position, and increase its communication efforts. The tourism sector will have to do its part, by more visibly sponsoring community activities. Better visibility of these activities through the Town's

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communication efforts, will contribute to a better visitor experience and generate net returns to the industry.

Blue Mountain Village Association Effectiveness

- a) *Do you believe that BMVA is effective in its Vision and Mission and that we add value to residents, businesses and government?*

There is no doubt that the BMVA has been effective in bringing additional tourists to the area, and this has benefited the businesses in our community. It has been less effective in explaining to the residents how this has contributed to the liveability of the community.

- b) *Will you support continued partnership between BMVA and the Town?*

Yes, much more partnership is needed. We need to elect a Council that understands that we are a tourism based economy and more like Whistler than Fort McMurray.

Leadership, Strategy & Economic Development

- a) *Please share what your leadership approach will be and how you will ensure that all community voices – including the business community – will be incorporated into your work.*

My leadership approach is one of community engagement and bringing people together. I have demonstrated my ability to do this by founding the Citizens' Forum. In my career in mining I have gained experience engaging with communities and various stakeholders, and working with them towards solutions which meet the expectations of both business and the community.

- b) *Please share your thoughts on how the Town of The Blue Mountains can improve its approach to solutions, service and collaboration.*

Communication, communication, and more communication!!!. The Town needs to communicate what is going to be happening in the community before it happens. This means more than just putting the required information on its website and holding the required public meetings, but actually making sure people are aware of the information and that the feedback is shared with the business community. Early identification of potential issues is vital to finding solutions that meet the needs of all stakeholders. A good start is the formation of the Communications Committee, a committee of citizens, staff and council which is being formed as a response to a request by the Citizens Forum.

Two main parts of my platform are rebuilding trust and restoring responsible government. We can take concrete steps in these areas by going out and meeting people and listening to them. I will be holding monthly Meet the Mayor meetings in various parts of the community.

Council can set an example for accountability and responsibility by reducing the number of closed door meetings, and changing its procedures so that every vote of

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council is recorded and posted with the minutes of our council meetings. It should also keep attendance records for council and post a summary on the Town website.

These changes although minor and procedural will set an example that we are all accountable and responsible to the community.

With our new interim CAO, there is already a noticeable improvement in engagement, service and collaboration between the staff and the community, and with the new Council's leadership we can continue this trend.

Economic Development Strategy for Future

- a) *What initiatives would you propose to ensure Town of The Blue Mountains has a robust and diverse economic strategy for short and long term growth?*

In 2009/2010 the Town produced an economic development document called Red Hot and Blue: Economic Prosperity for The Blue Mountains. It was developed at some expense and a lot of consultation. Its objectives were to develop and promote the brand of the TBM as a sustainable four-season tourist destination, which provided a family friendly experience, which included in addition to the activities surrounding the mountain and the Blue Mountain Resort, quiet beaches and trails , agriculture and food, as well as eco-tourism. It also identified issues such as attainable housing. While some of this vision, as well as that in other documents including the 2010 Sustainable Path and the 2015 Corporate Strategic Plan, have come to fruition these strategies have largely gathered dust because there is no one on the senior management team with responsibility for managing the Towns Economic Development Strategy.

The first step is to upgrade the position of Economic Development & Communications Coordinator to a Senior Management Team position. Economic development is the lifeblood of a liveable community. This means having a strategy to support our existing economic sectors such as tourism, agriculture, and manufacturing. It is also critical to support small businesses that want to move here. Economic development deserves to be elevated to a senior management team position.

Critical issues which negatively impact economic development include workforce issues due to the lack attainable housing and public transit, and the lack of reliable high speed internet service.

I will talk about attainable housing and transit in the sections on those topics.

We must push the development of the SouthWestern Integrated Fibre Technology (SWIFT) Rural residents and businesses need reliable high speed internet and cell

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phone coverage. Increasingly farming also relies on connectivity. We need to support the development of these communication services.

b) How would you organize & finance such initiatives?

Minimal additional tax funding is required for the Town to upgrade the position of Economic Development & Communications Coordinator to a Senior Management Team position, hire someone to fill the position, and give Economic Development the priority it deserves.

Support for extension of cell and internet coverage can be in the form of encouraging the private sector through expedited approvals, and should not require funding from the public purse.

Labour Market Issues

Labour Shortage

a) What initiatives would you support to attract and retain workers to the area?

To attract and retain workers we need to make this a great place for young families.

This means ensuring there is:

- 1) attainable housing;
- 2) adequate child care; and,
- 3) support for youth activities.

Without these things, young families will not be able to or want to settle here. Already we see signs in every shop window for help wanted. Without a workforce there will be no one to work in our stores, our doctor's offices, in our schools and our seniors residences.

b) How would you organize & finance such initiatives?

Last year we sent \$8 M to the Bluewater District School Board. We should work with the school board to see if we can get more of this spent on pre and after school programs in our community. The business community also needs to do its part in funding child care for its employees. The Town can help by removing red tape for people wanting to set up child care businesses and programs for children, and by providing space in under-utilized Town facilities at minimal cost.

Housing Issues

Attainable Housing

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a) What specific initiatives would you support to increase the supply of attainable housing in Town of The Blue Mountains & area?

This has been an issue that has been ignored for far too long. Other recreation based communities started taking action decades ago. Whistler started in 1983 and in 1997 established the Whistler Housing Authority a not for profit housing authority and now has a resident restricted housing stock of 2,034 housing units (946 rental units and 1,087 owner owned units, 6500 beds). This has, in part contributed to enabling 78% of Whistler's workforce to live in Whistler, and Whistler has much higher real estate prices than we do. The Whistler Housing Authority is financially self-sufficient, and does not rely on the municipal residential tax base.

The time for half measures is over. We should move forward with taking our Attainable Housing Corporation and converting it into Whistler style housing authority. It works there, why not here? It's going to be a lot of work, but we have a successful model to follow.

We should look at using the unused housing stock in the community. I know of at least one property that has sat vacant for years and I am told there are many others. One mandate of the Housing Authority would be to actively source these properties and offer to manage them, pay the taxes and maintain them in order to lease them at a rate that would allow it to rent them to people who qualify based on their income and residency status at a reasonable rate, while still breaking even.

The Housing Authority could also look at collaboration with the agricultural community who have been providing worker housing for years.

We could also look at allowing severances from farm properties, to allow for affordable homes to be built for family members who wish to remain in the community. Any homes built on such severances would be limited to below a certain size and price range, and would have resale restrictions placed on them to ensure they remain as attainable housing. (ie. if no longer used by a family member would have to be sold to the Housing Authority at a capped price and on a resident restricted basis.)

Once established the Housing Authority would also have the mandate to build bigger projects through partnerships with developers. Funding for these projects would be through loans, which would be backed by occupancy guarantees by employers which would guarantee an acceptable return on investment.

b) How would you organize & finance such initiatives?

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This will be a private–public partnership. The Housing Authority would be an independent not-for-profit corporation which operates independently of the Town, and is self financing. Each project undertaken by it needs to be financially viable. The Town can help by making land available at a reasonable price or on a long term lease basis, and by easing zoning requirements for resident restricted housing owned by the Housing Authority. Employers would have to guarantee occupancy, to allow for funding of projects. Initially there may need to be some loan guarantees, but every project large or small would have to stand on its financial merits.

Short-term Accommodation (STA)

- a) *What initiatives would you support to protect occupancy levels of existing operators of STAs?*
- b) *What initiatives will you champion in relation to the STA program in the future?*

I support leaving the STA bylaw as it now stands with occupancy loads as they are. There needs to be better communication between our STA owners and the community, so they start to see themselves as collaborators rather than opponents. If we are to maintain our reputation as a great place for families to visit, it is to everyone’s advantage to see STAs managed properly, and people who are operating without a licence put out of business.

I would work towards reconciliation between the responsible STA owners and the community, so that issues can be addressed in a collaborative rather than an adversarial manner. I would also change the Bylaw to make it an infraction to advertise short term rental unless one has an STA licence. This will make it easier prosecute the illegal operators to put them out of business.

Town Services & Municipal Taxes

- a) *What Town services would you increase or decrease?*

I believe that the basic Town services are adequate to meet our needs. Although with the rapid growth we are experiencing we are collecting a lot in development charges we are not spending it on needed capital projects. How is it that in a growing community such as ours, over the last 2 years we spent \$3M less on capital projects than we took in depreciation and amortization. Our infrastructure is decaying faster than we are replacing it . Is it any wonder that 37% of the water we treat is never metered and paid for. We need to complete the asset management plan and start looking after our infrastructure.

This is not a service, but I believe more needs to be done to promote a sense of community. With the rapid growth of our community the social fabric of our community is changing. We have become a community of communities and as the recent bicycling conflict has shown we are under-going the classic gentrification conflict. Council needs to be proactive in bringing people together.

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b) Would you favour increasing or decreasing the tax rate of residents and businesses?

I am not in favour of increasing taxes. We can do a lot more with what we already collect by reducing expenditures on soft costs. Legal costs rose by 452% from \$93,600 in 2013 to \$422,878 last year, and the past two years Council has allocated taxation year end surpluses to the Legal and Human Resources Reserve Funds. We need to reduce spending on these items and refocus spending on basic services and capital projects.

We also need to get a better deal from Grey County . We are the economic engine that drives Grey County and we send 39% of our tax dollars to Grey County. Last year we wrote almost \$16 M dollars in cheques to Grey County and funded 26% of the county taxation based budget. We do not get an adequate return on this investment in terms of capital spending and services.

Transportation Issues

a) What initiatives would you support to increase transportation options for visitors, residents and workers in the area?

The pilot project between Wasaga Beach and the Village is a great initiative but what is really needed is a regional transportation service between Owen Sound and Collingwood. Currently the unemployment rate in Owen Sound is 50% higher than in Collingwood.

b) How would you organize & finance such initiatives?

The County and Province need to get involved in this. Costs of a transportation system cannot be viewed in isolation. Some of these unemployed people are on social assistance funded at the county and provincial level. The cost of providing transportation would be at least partly offset by reduced social assistance costs, not to mention the added benefit of having someone gainfully employed and paying taxes.

Active Transportation/Cycling

a) Do you support increased cycling options for the region, including the Collingwood/Village cycling route?

We have seen the number of cyclists in our community increase over the last decade and have done very little to manage this change. We need to create a Town of the Blue Mountains Cycling and Road Use Master Plan, which meets the needs of both our cyclists and our existing farming, tourism, and trucking communities. This should have been done years ago.

The first step is to immediately put together a Cycling Advisory Committee with representation from all of these communities, one member of Council, and engineering staff from both the Town and County.

The mandate of the Committee will be to within one year

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- identify those roads which are most suitable for bicycle lanes, taking into account traffic patterns and the use of the roads by cyclists and farm and truck traffic
- assist Town and County staff with the development and implementation of the Cycling and Road Use Master Plan and ongoing development of on road and off road routes.
- to identify issues regarding safety of on-road lanes and off-road pathways within the TBM and to propose alternative solutions based on research, including corporate transportation studies, strategic plans, proposed Official Plan amendments, recommendations regarding trails and relevant site plans.

The goal of the committee will be to promote a safe cycling environment on an integrated on-road and multi-use trail system, which is in harmony with the community.

b) How would you organize & finance such initiatives

I would look to the County for funding, as this is part of what drives our tourism based economy and our growth, and which then results in the funding we provide them. I would look for corporate and private sponsors to assist with the off-road portions of the trail system.

Road Safety

a) What road safety improvements would you prioritize and why?

Improvements do need to be made to marking pedestrian crossings, and restricting parking so that there are adequate sight lines. Improved maintenance is not only necessary, but cost effective, as it can prolong the life of the road.

We need to slow down the traffic through Craigleith. Improving and widening Highway 26 is not a good option. Improvements will only generate more through traffic and add to our traffic woes. We need slower traffic and more roundabouts to keep it moving without stop lights, so that the slower speed limits are not an impediment to the tourism experience. The recent approval of roundabouts on Grey Road 19 and 21 is a good step forward.

Long term planning is needed to manage our road network and traffic flows, in terms of vehicular, bicycle and pedestrian traffic. This means bicycle lanes and paved shoulders on selected roads.

b) How would you organize & finance such initiatives?

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If long term planning is incorporated into reconstruction projects the additional costs of providing improvements to the existing road network can be reduced.