



Staff Report

Planning & Development Services

Report To: COW-Operations_Planning_and_Development_Services
Meeting Date: October 29, 2024
Report Number: PDS.24.134
Title: Grey County Centralized Planning Services Model – Staff Feedback
Prepared by: Adam Smith, Director of Planning & Development Services

A. Recommendations

THAT Council receive Staff Report PDS.24.134, entitled “Grey County Centralized Planning Services Model – Staff Feedback”;

AND THAT Council directs staff to submit this report to the County of Grey for consideration to support further investigation of a centralized planning model.

B. Overview

The report summarizes the feedback from staff in Planning and Development Services regarding the proposed centralization of Planning Services under Grey County.

C. Background

On February 8, 2024, County staff presented the Planning Efficiencies Report PDR-CW-03-24 to the County’s Committee of the Whole. In that report County staff noted researching planning service delivery models as an area for further investigation regarding planning efficiencies. Subsequently, a closed session meeting amongst the nine member municipalities of Grey County occurred on June 27, 2024. Following research on other two-tier planning service delivery models used in Ontario, as well as discussion with all nine municipal CAOs, staff prepared options for County Council’s consideration.

The preferred option that County staff received direction to further explore was having all planning services be centralized at the County within one County Planning department that provides planning services for both member municipalities and the County. However, planning decision making authority would be unchanged from the current service delivery model. The desired benefits in the shift to this model includes:

- Planning process efficiencies;
- Creating greater resiliency with respect to individual staff changes;
- Succession planning;
- Mentoring junior staff members;

- The ability to provide specialized skillsets (e.g., policy planning);
- Customer service;
- Reducing duplication of efforts;
- Knowledge transfer, training, and problem solving;
- Consistency in development process and application of policy;
- Less use of external consultants.

In receiving this direction, Grey County planning staff briefed planning teams across the County on August 9, 2024. These teams had the opportunity to discuss the proposed changes and a request was made by the County to work with the local CAOs in submitting additional comments and questions.

D. Analysis

The continual review of organizational structures and internal processes is a practice that should be encouraged in municipal government. Doing so is the means to which innovation can be fostered and cost-savings can potentially be realized. Staff appreciate the significant time and effort County staff have dedicated to identifying efficiencies in the planning process. The analysis contained within this section of the report has been approached under the following assumptions being;

- The County remains in the exploratory stage in which the centralized planning services model remains fluid.
- The County is seeking to further inform the model through feedback and questions from both lower-tier councils and staff.
- Upon receipt of comments/questions from member municipalities, a follow-up report will be prepared that will allow for additional discussion.

Since planning staff at the Town of The Blue Mountains have been briefed by the County on the proposal, staff have prepared the following considerations for Council's benefit. For ease of reference, the input has been focused upon the anticipated benefits noted in the above section.

Human Resources (recruitment, retention, succession planning, mentorship, specialized skillsets)

Recruitment and retention of staff in Planning Services is a major challenge for the Town and is a pervasive issue across the country recognizing the pivotal role of planning staff in addressing the national housing crisis. Between 2022 and 2024 the average time to fill planner positions was 110 days with a turnover rate during this period of 55 percent. From January 2022 to present, the division has only been fully staffed for 32 percent of the time.

In comparison, the Town average to fill a position in 2023 was 58 days with a turnover rate of 10 percent. To address the issue of recruitment and retention, staff have consistently applied different techniques to close the gap. This includes profiling remote work opportunities, promoting job openings through social media platforms, professional associations and

municipal job advertisement sites. Additionally, job descriptions and titles are continually reviewed to attract qualified applicants. Understanding that recruitment and retention is an issue across the County, consideration should be given to what innovative measures can be conducted through centralization that has not been implemented previously.

Many communities may benefit from a centralized planning model given the opportunities for advancement in different areas such as development review and policy planning. However, the Town of The Blue Mountains, is uniquely positioned in terms of capacity and opportunities for advancement that does not exist throughout the County. Currently, the Planning Services Division is composed of a Manager, Senior Planner, Senior/Intermediate Planner and Planner and is the largest in the County. A concern with centralization is that it may entail fewer senior positions and/or staff more generally dedicated to matters specific to the Town. Further, while the Town does not have specialized positions that are focused upon either development review or policy planning, each staff member has the opportunity to be involved in both areas which is reflected in job descriptions and highlighted in recruitment efforts.

While there is a concern that staff may have fewer opportunities internally, opportunities could exist for either secondments or movement to positions at the policy planning level that may benefit the Town. The ability to better leverage an enhanced policy planning function at the County may lead to policy projects being completed in a timely manner and with a lens to creating consistency across the County to support better development outcomes.

The movement of staff between functional areas and development review teams could offer benefits from a mentorship and knowledge transfer perspective. Currently, a community of practice does exist for planners and quarterly meetings are hosted by the County, but the centralized reporting structure could intensify these engagements. Leadership at the County will have more authority to leverage best practices between municipalities.

Customer Service

The customers of Planning Services vary from property owners seeking to install a deck to large development corporations undertaking multi-million-dollar projects involving hundreds of housing units. Planning is not a technical process and often there is no right or wrong answer and recommendations are informed by public engagement at the local level. Alongside this is a review of policy at both the local and county level which creates a robust framework in carrying out a holistic review of files. The perspectives provided at the local level are more specific than the general goals of the overall County. These perspectives can be difficult to embed into a technical process as every development or policy project may require a unique approach to gain the information and detail required to make an informed decision.

Moving to a centralized planning system at the County level may eliminate the benefit of having both a local and county planning perspective on growth. A centralized system may also reduce the breadth of our existing planning processes such as enhanced public engagement, public outreach and communications, and other functions that the municipal level currently undertakes. Despite the challenges of this approach when married against statutory review timelines and the potential for these additional steps to create an appeal risk, often customers

of Planning Services understand that being sensitive and reflective of public concerns is more conducive than strict adherence to minimum requirements set forth in by-laws and provincial statutes.

Essential to the approach to customer service in Planning Services is the accessibility of staff and on-site presence. Centralization will need to consider this level of service given many customers often prefer to interact and complete transactions with staff in-person. While the quality of service does not differ through virtual means or in-person, the ability to provide both on a regular basis is expected.

Planning process efficiencies and reducing duplication of efforts

The Town is fortunate to have a strong relationship with County administration that minimizes inefficiencies often perceived to occur in decentralized models. Communication between the levels of government is both clear and constructive. The overlap could be estimated at about 10% of a process, and although there may be duplication of planning review, there is also the benefit to receive confirmation of a planning analysis, or an opportunity to discuss a difference in opinions.

There are a number of positive impacts a centralized planning system can provide such as using an available pool of planners to support municipalities that may need more support. The current duplication of the 'technical steps' in a planning process can be eliminated, such as the need for joint public meetings, local and county level review and decisions, website content/communications, and also eliminate the confusion that the public may see in terms of who has authority on which portions of a project (local level approves Zoning Amendments and recommends to County level the approval of Subdivision, Condominium and Official Plan Amendments).

From a Town staff perspective, the inefficiencies in the planning process are less tied to overlap between the lower-tier and upper-tier and more connected to the difficulty in marrying increasingly higher expectations from the public into planning reviews that are subject to narrowing scope. This climate is complicating decision-making that is anticipated to remain unchanged through centralization.

Consistency in development process and application of policy

A centralized model may also aid the County in that there is one standardized process across all municipalities to review development files, and also to establish new policies county wide. Currently each local municipality has their own development file review process and implements long term policies on their own. It is noted that these individual review processes have been developed and cater to the local needs and interests of each community.

Centralization will carry the benefit of enhancing the ability to create consistent development review practices across the County that can likely reduce development costs that may in turn assist in delivering on priorities such as affordable/attainable housing. For example, practices such as the standardization of conditions tied to certain planning applications reduces risk and uncertainty that affect costs. However, with many planning matters being subject to a public

process that can be iterative between communities, there will inevitably be inconsistent outcomes. As noted earlier in the report, policy is often subject to interpretation with differing perspectives not necessarily being a concern, in fact, it is often necessary for staff to apply policy in manner that reflects the local context.

The development review process for The Blue Mountains is unique with the inclusion of Interdepartmental Review and Development Review Committees and enhanced public consultation practices. The Town currently goes above and beyond minimum Planning Act requirements as Council has directed, and is proud, that development and policy projects are required to go beyond those minimums. Through a centralized system that is looking to implement efficiencies, many of these enhanced processes could be eliminated to simply meet minimum provincial requirements.

Other Factors for Consideration

Roles and responsibilities

With centralization there will need to be further consideration of the roles and responsibilities for certain positions in Planning and Development Services. If the Director position and associated technical/administrative staff remain with the lower-tier municipality, it is unclear if these positions will continue to have a role in the planning process. For the Director position, the planning portfolio is over 50 percent of the Director workload. If the intent is still for the Director to support planning staff, this creates an unclear chain of command between the Town and County. Often the Director serves as the liaison with the CAO and Council to navigate challenges associated with planning files through the public process. It is unclear if this will continue, or any concerns and issues management will be within the realm of the Director at the County level. With all staff ultimately reporting through this channel, the span of control for this position will be extensive and could create challenges in terms of responsiveness.

Other positions impacted include the Administrative Assistant for Planning Services and GIS Specialist for Planning Services. With a centralized planning model, the assumption is that there is to be a centralized intake of applications and technical support. In doing so, similar to the Director, a significant percentage of their duties will be impacted.

Impacts on projects

The Town is currently embarking on a number of initiatives that may need to be revisited in proceeding with a centralized planning model. The PDS Fee Review is expected to be concluded by the end of the year but the inputs to this exercise will need to be adjusted for Planning recognizing a new County-led model. There may not be value in pursuing the scope of work for Planning Services any further if the intent is to solely rely upon the existing fee schedule of the County.

Cloudpermit is anticipated to be implemented for Planning Services in late-2024, early 2025. Given the County does not use utilize this system it is unclear as to whether the project can be continued in transitioning to the new model.

Understanding that municipalities will continue to maintain their own Official Plan and Zoning By-laws, the current review of the Official Plan will be unaffected. Based on this approach, staff also believe that projects identified over the next 1-2 years such as the creation a Community Planning Permit System and a local Natural Heritage System, would also be he unaffected but this would need to be confirmed.

Summary of Key Questions

1. Can the development review and policy planning role of existing staff continue upon centralization?
2. Beyond the opportunities for specialization, what other advantages are provided through centralization to support recruitment and retention efforts for planning staff?
3. What impacts are anticipated for modernization efforts of Planning Services such as the PDS Fee Review and implementation of Cloudpermit?
4. Understanding that local decision-making remains intact could further clarity be provided on the role of the Director position and support staff following centralization?
5. Every municipality has a distinct review process. How does the County intend on gathering feedback and managing perspectives from departments in development review? For the Town, would the Interdepartmental Review Committee and Development Review Committee remain in place?
6. Will the full range of planning services be available in-person and on-site in The Blue Mountains?
7. Through the investigation of the centralized planning model, will a cost-analysis be completed and if so, what would be the scope?

E. Strategic Priorities

1. Communication and Engagement

We will enhance communications and engagement between Town Staff, Town residents and stakeholders.

2. Organizational Excellence

We will continually seek out ways to improve the internal organization of Town Staff and the management of Town assets.

3. Community

We will protect and enhance the community feel and the character of the Town, while ensuring the responsible use of resources and restoration of nature.

4. Quality of Life

We will foster a high quality of life for full-time and part-time residents of all ages and stages, while welcoming visitors.

F. Environmental Impacts

N/A

G. Financial Impacts

N/A

H. In Consultation With

Shawn Postma, Manager of Community Planning

Sarah Traynor, Manager of Human Resources

I. Public Engagement

The topic of this Staff Report has not been the subject of a Public Meeting and/or a Public Information Centre as neither a Public Meeting nor a Public Information Centre are required. However, any comments regarding this report should be submitted to Adam Smith, directorplanningdevelopment@thebluemountains.ca

J. Attached

1. Grey County Planning Efficiencies Report - PDR-CW-03-24

Respectfully submitted,

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For more information, please contact:
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