

Blue Mountains Attainable
Housing Corporation:
Communications Focus Group

February 25, 2021



Overview

On February 17th, 2021, Blue Mountains Attainable Housing Corporation (BMAHC) conducted a **Communications Focus Group** with PROCESS. This focus group was centred around communications for Attainable Housing and BMAHC's Gateway Project. 16 community members and prospective residents were invited to participate in the focus group. Participants' bios can be found in **Appendix A, Table 1**.

The main objectives of the focus group were to:

- Share information about BMAHC and attainable housing to the focus group
- Collect research on Town of Blue Mountains' residents' perspectives on attainable housing to inform key messages and a communications and engagement strategy to support meaningful conversation about attainable housing and the Gateway Site.

The focus group included the focus elements:

1. Introductory presentation on BMAHC's mandate and information on attainable housing provided by Sharon McCormick, Executive Director of BMAHC.
 - a. Update on the Gateway Project
2. Two facilitated breakout discussions to talk about: attainable housing, communications, and process.

Key Takeaways

PROCESS analyzed all feedback gathered and uncovered the following key takeaways:

Overall emergent themes

The emergent themes from the focus group fall under three main themes: plan, people and pride. The recommended next steps from this report are to:

- **Plan** for strategic and effective communications around BMAHC, attainable housing and the Gateway Project. Also, provide transparent plans for how the project is funded, any planning studies underway and the overall process.
- Put **people** at the centre of BMAHC's communications and key messages. Focus on how attainable housing benefits the people who currently live in The Blue Mountains community as well as prospective residents of BMAHC developments.
- Create a building that creates **pride for the town** by integrating it within the community and ensuring design excellence. Future development must be something that town can take pride in.

As for overall feedback and suggestion themes include:

- Create capacity for communications including a **communications strategy and that dedicated communication staff**. Suggestion to be more responsive and attentive to community-based discussion channels that are actively discussing BMAHC and the Gateway Project (e.g., the Citizen Forum Facebook group)
- Sharon McCormick should take on a **spokesperson** role to communicate out attainable housing activity and initiatives in The Blue Mountains. This is because some focus group members felt a lack of ownership around attainable housing in the community and that a spokesperson would improve visibility and approachability. It would also ensure consistent messaging.
- BMAHC needs to develop a reputation for **transparency and accountability**, including addressing its funding streams.

The top takeaways from the focus group are:

1. There is need to better communicate / successfully deliver the messages about what attainable housing is and how that applies directly to The Blue Mountains' community. This includes creating a plain language approach to communication, increasing frequency and diversity of tactics (e.g., attentive approach to social media, regularly updating the website, and engaging through events).
2. Opportunity to develop a communications and engagement strategy to holistically plan for and strategically connect with BMAHC's audiences to improve transparency and accountability for BMAHC and the Gateway Site Project.

Detailed Feedback

The following subsections summarize the detailed feedback collected in the breakout groups across three discussion themes: 1) Attainable Housing; 2) Communications; and 3) Process

Attainable Housing Discussion

Focus Group participants were asked core **Attainable Housing** discussion questions:

1. What does attainable housing mean to you?
2. What do people understand about attainable housing in the Blue Mountains area? How does attainable housing differ and/or compliment social or affordable housing?
3. Do you believe there is a need for attainable housing in the Blue Mountains? Why or why not?
4. How would you describe the value of attainable housing? What's the value proposition of attainable housing?
5. What's in it for the community?

The following is the **Attainable Housing** feedback, insights and suggestions provided by focus group members during the Focus Group discussion:

- **Better definition and articulation of attainable housing and how it pertains to The Blue Mountains is needed.**
 - There is confusion between the terms 'affordable housing' and 'attainable housing' and an acknowledgement that citizens and audiences have limited resources to learn about 'attainable housing'. This causes some to assume affordable and attainable are interchangeable terms when it comes to housing.
 - Participants appreciated the housing spectrum graphic that Sharon used in her presentation that defined attainable housing in relation to market rate rental/ownership and social housing.
- Participants indicated that BMAHC's language around attainable housing is **confusing and unapproachable.**
 - The concept of attainable housing is irrelevant, jargony or means very little to some in the community. The introduction of attainable housing terminology is not helpful and a focus on outputs/projects might be more effective.
- **The focus group acknowledges the need for attainable housing.**
 - Some participants connected the need for attainable housing to residents' ability to contribute to the local community and economy. When half of one's earnings go to housing, they have very limited capacity to participate in the local economy. One focus group member

said, *“when people spend more than 30% of their income, they don’t have income to spend in the local community and economy”.*

- Another participant acknowledged the potential for attainable housing to attract and invite younger people to live in The Blue Mountains. Youth brings vibrancy to the town and attainable housing is critical to create a balanced community.
- The focus group identified the strong presence of **“NIMBYism”** where current and previous residents are opposed to attainable housing as it contradicts the **“small town charm”** of The Blue Mountains.
- Participants indicated that attainable housing could help address compounding issues related to **sustainability, climate change** and **changing housing preferences due to the pandemic**.
- Participants indicated that the three factions of people in need of attainable housing being **young families, seniors and seasonal housing**.

ATTAINABLE HOUSING CONSIDERATIONS

- Consider redefining attainable housing.
- Consider defining how attainable housing differs to affordable housing.
- The housing spectrum graphic resonated with most focus group members. Consider creating a simplified, plain language version for the website and communications tools.
- Consider a Communications and Engagement Strategy that sustains discussion across perspectives to increase community capacity.
- Consider telling the story of how attainable housing compliments the “small town charm”.

Communications Discussion

Focus Group participants were asked core **Communications** discussion questions:

1. What communication have you heard/read about attainable housing?
2. What communications have been effective? What messages about attainable housing do you know? Where have you learned about and heard about attainable housing?
3. Who should be delivering messages about attainable housing? Your Councillor, business leader, developer, etc.?
4. Who’s missing? Who is not engaging in this process that we need to reach?
5. What housing myths do we need to clarify or address?

The following is the **Communications** feedback, insights and suggestions provided by focus group members during the Focus Group discussion:

- The resounding suggestion was for BMAHC to develop an overall **Engagement and Communications strategy for BMAHC and the Gateway Project**. Some suggestions included:
 - Identify target audiences and prospective users and champions. While some focus group members indicated an interest in being champions, further engagement is needed to build these relationships and establish these champions and their roles.
 - The majority of the focus group members indicated that sharing the stories of the people who would use and benefit from attainable housing is more impactful than sharing project details. One focus group member disagreed saying that project details resonate more with the community.
 - BMAHC should consider a designated communications staff to manage community liaison and Sharon should be the spokesperson.
 - Marketing to prospective residents is key. This includes lifestyle and neighbourhood amenities. Prospective residents also indicated that messaging on how attainable housing provides opportunities like employment, livability, and social connections for them are valued.
- **The focus group acknowledges the benefit of centring the local economic benefits.** Communicating the median income in The Blue Mountains and how they would benefit from attainable housing. What does it mean to spend 30% of income on housing rather than 50% or more?
- Participants raised the idea of holding an open house or town hall on the site and **employ tactical engagement approaches** to experience the Gateway Project (e.g., spray paint in where the building would be and the sidewalk, helping to dispel myths about areas such as the sewage treatment plant).
- **Opinions on reports, graphs, data, and statistics are mixed.** Some participants expressed that everyone in the town already knows housing facts and others indicated that the graphs are useful for well researched and housing literate audiences. Overall, participants noted that simple language is critical to get community buy-in.
 - One participant said, *“Reports are boring to most people. Reports also communicate to higher educated people. Make the main points from the report into digestible parts.”*
- Participants encouraged bigger picture messaging. Embed attainable housing in the local neighbourhood context rather than treating it as isolated projects.
- One focus group member identifies key priorities of the community as **transportation, housing, and childcare**.

COMMUNICATIONS CONSIDERATIONS

- Consider creating a communications and marketing strategy. In the strategy work, consider developing strategic communications tactics and communications criteria to address where / what forums to participate.
- Consider dedicated staff to lead / implement all communications.
- Consider creating flyers and mail-in surveys.

Process Discussion

Focus Group participants were asked core **Process** questions:

1. What are the housing needs and demographics in the area?
2. Do you understand the planning process? Do you have any questions about the development process or timelines?
3. Are you interested in helping to champion attainable housing?
4. What are your recommendations for communication strategies to reach you and your neighbours?

The following is the **Process** feedback, insights and suggestions provided by focus group members during the Focus Group discussion:

- Some participants indicated that the **Citizen Forum Facebook group** is the best channel to immediately engage active community members (others questioned this).
- Some participants suggested that **mail-in surveys** are a good way to get to community members who do not use digital surveys (over online surveys)
- Some participants shared confusion from a previous communications tactics where BMAHC communicated schematics and drawings for the Gateway Project and residents were asked to select which one they wanted. Participants indicated that this **damaged BMAHC's reputation** when residents found out that none of the drawings were actually going to be used.
- Some participants reiterate that **keeping everyone informed in every step is critical**. For communications, this means understanding that discussions around attainable housing are following a coordinated strategy. The focus group did not identify any accessible or effective communications tools that are currently active.
- Some participants say that **accountability** and communicating out / feedback loops are critical. This includes transparency about BMAHC's funding streams, how BMAHC is engaging in the community, and how BMAHC has incorporated previously collected community recommendations and feedback.

PROCESS CONSIDERATIONS

- Consider developing an engagement plan as part of the communications strategy.
- Follow-up with focus group members and identify champions who can work to support attainable housing projects.
- Develop greater understanding of the political context to create strategies to optimize opportunities and mitigate challenges.
- Integrate key messages about the planning process to increase literacy for all audience segments.
- Via guidelines in the Communications Strategy, update the BMAHC and Gateway newsletter and website.

APPENDIX A: Focus Group Participant Introductions

The focus group started with introductions and a land acknowledgement from BMAHC Executive Director Sharon McCormick and PROCESS Principal, Nadia Galati. Focus group members were encouraged to introduce themselves, their interest in Attainable Housing, the Gateway Project, and share any hobby they may have picked up during the pandemic (see **Table 1**).

Table 1: Focus Group Participant Introductions

Focus group member	Introduction
Caroline Abbots	Caroline is a 6th generation resident of Beaver Valley, until she recently had to move to Meaford because it is the only semi-affordable housing nearby her work in Thornbury.
Dana Kalzuny	Dana works in Project Management and is an educator and social justice advocate. She has helped to run “Out of the Cold” Collingwood Temporary Shelter, which is South Georgian Bay’s only emergency shelter. Dana also manages a community food program.
Kim Harris	Kim is a resident of Clarksburg. Born in Toronto, Kim was drawn to Thornbury to be closer to her Father. Kim is on The Blue Mountains Sustainability Committee and advocates for sustainable practices throughout the town. Kim claims that she “marches to the drum of sustainability.”
Linda Wykes	Linda has lived in the Collingwood area since she was 2, working for her father’s print company. In the late 70’s, Linda’s father ran the local newspaper. This inspired Linda to start a local newspaper 7 years ago. Linda enjoys gathering information and learning about what is going on. She started The Blue Mountains Legacy fund where they are raising money to donate the interest. The first fundraiser was on Sunday and they delivered 80 valentines’ dinners to residents of the town.
Lucy Richmond	Lucy is a passionate resident of the Blue Mountains. With the intention of buying a large home for grandchildren, Lucy has become a passionate member of the town. Lucy claims to live in attainable housing in The Blue Mountains, with the luxury of walking to the beach and the trail from her doorstep, needing out a car for food-runs. Lucy became interested in civic matters when the Ontario Ministry of Transportation made plans to widen highway 26. To fight this she formed local community groups and wrote the Minister of Transportation. This developed a strong passion in understanding legislation to protect the town.
John Milne	John lives in Thornbury. He was a part-time resident for over 20 years and has now been full-time 7 years.

Focus group member	Introduction
Bruce Taylor	Bruce comes from 7 years of looking after BMAHC himself and is proud to see how it has evolved today. Bruce retired from BMAHC in 2007. Bruce now teaches architectural programs, including site and provincial planning and zoning. Bruce is interested in BMAHC's constituents.
Garth Armour	Garth moved to Collingwood 15 years ago but started living full-time 3 years ago. Garth is a Landscape Architect and worked at City of Toronto and the parks department in his past. He has great interest in The Blue Mountains and Thornbury and wants to see it become the best little town possible. Garth states that there is pressure on the town, as it is rapidly changing. Residents will need to be on board to let it continue to be the great town that it is today.
Erin Gosnell	Erin is born and raised in Collingwood, however, she moved to Meaford due to the unattainable housing in Thornbury. Erin still commutes to Thornbury, as she is an employee of the Home Hardware. Erin has continued working straight through COVID but taken up diamond painting as an indulgence.
Jim Torrance	Jim has lived in Thornbury for 4 years and has started The Blue Mountain Ratepayers' Association. Jim has contributed to attainable housing efforts and is anxious to see their successes but is also in need of having communication requirements met.