



North Huron Community Improvement Background Report

July 2018

Executive Summary

A Community Improvement Plan (CIP) has been proposed to help support and revitalize the downtown core commercial areas within North Huron. A CIP is a tool that the Township may use to issue financial incentives to landowners and tenants within a designated community improvement project area. A CIP may also encourage other municipal projects and initiatives that support the goals of the CIP. The legislation and policy framework is supportive of a CIP for North Huron to help implement local planning policies. The Planning Act provides the legislative basis for preparing a CIP, and outlines the powers that municipalities may utilize to help carry out the CIP. The North Huron Official Plan contains policies regarding the types of areas that are suitable for a CIP. The CIP for North Huron is consistent with the policies of the North Huron Official Plan and, it is suggested that a CIP is desirable for North Huron and can help to achieve the township's planning goals for the community. A preliminary Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis was undertaken for Wingham and Blyth's main commercial streets. Based on the SWOT analysis in this report, as well as the policy review, the report makes conclusions regarding four key "critical needs" that the CIP should help to address:

- Improve visual state of historic buildings on the main commercial streets
- Address the long-term viability of older buildings
- Support the creation of a barrier-free pedestrian environment
- Improve pedestrian safety and public realm aesthetics



Figure 1: Wingham Downtown Core



Figure 2: Blyth Downtown Core

marketing activities and plan monitoring and evaluation. The Township may also offer financial incentives to property owners within the designated community improvement project area, such as grants, loans, tax incentives, and building and planning fee reductions.

a) Purpose of the Community Improvement Project Study

The purpose of the North Huron Community Improvement Plan study is to prepare a Community Improvement Plan (CIP) for the Township of North Huron with a focus on the main commercial streets of the settlement areas. The first phase of the study includes the preparation of this background report, which is intended to present options for:

- Potential financial incentive programs;
- The community improvement project area; and

Section 1: Introduction

Both Wingham and Blyth contribute to North Huron with concentrations of commercial activity and residential density, historic neighborhoods and downtown cores that are full of character. To help promote improvement and revitalization of the downtown cores, the Township of North Huron has initiated the preparation of a Community Improvement Plan (CIP).

A CIP is a planning tool which may be used to stimulate investment and/or new development within a specified project area identified by a municipal by-law. Through a CIP, the Township can engage in prioritized, strategic improvement projects, such as streetscape improvements, infrastructure investments, land acquisition and improvement, planning studies, urban design guidelines, plan

- Administration of the community improvement plan;

The proposed options for the community improvement project area and financial incentive programs are based in part upon a review of relevant Provincial legislation and policies, relevant municipal policies, zoning and planning studies, as well as a Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats (SWOT) analysis of the study area. This background report/discussion paper will form the basis for preparing the draft CIP.

The North Huron CIP will contain a detailed list of proposed financial incentive programs and eligibility criteria, and an overall recommended leadership strategy to address administration of the Plan and to propose other projects and actions to support the CIP's implementation. Consultation in this phase will include ongoing communication with Municipal staff, the CIP review team and other stakeholders, as well as a public open house to present and obtain input on the Draft CIP and a statutory public meeting in accordance with the *Planning Act*. As additional input from the public, stakeholders and the municipality is considered, the community improvement plan will evolve. The project will conclude with Council's adoption of the Community Improvement Project Area and the Community Improvement Plan.

b) Community Improvement Project Study Area

The CIP study area includes the wards of Wingham (Figure 3) and Blyth (Figure 4), both identified as settlement areas in the North Huron Official Plan. These settlement areas each contain downtown commercial cores with historic buildings, architectural features and pedestrian pathways. The CIP Project Area will be determined based on results from the background study, political decisions and public consultation. The CIP study will consider the possibility of revitalizing all areas of the communities but will concentrate on the downtown cores. One of the outcomes of this study will be the designation of a Community Improvement Project Area. The selected community improvement project area may include both the entire study areas, or it may only include a portion or certain portions of the study areas. Community improvement activities may only be carried out within the designated community improvement project area.

The location of the town of Wingham was originally settled in the early 1850s, during the surveying of the township of Turnberry in 1853 and establishment of a town at the Maitland River. A post office with the namesake of Wingham was opened in 1862. The expansion of the railway led to the growth of the area and the incorporation of Wingham as a Village in 1874. Wingham was recognized for its contributions to the agriculture and lumber industries. In 1879, Wingham was incorporated as a Town, which it remained until it was amalgamated as part of the creation of the Township of North Huron in 2001, with the fellow wards of East Wawanosh and Blyth.

Settlers had arrived to the Blyth area by 1851 and in 1855 a village was laid out on the border between Wawanosh and Morris Townships. The next year a post-office was established which led to the development of the village. Eventually there was a sawmill, church, tavern and store in what was originally known as the Village of Drummond. The village was renamed Blyth after an absentee landowner and speculator. In 1876, a railway station was opened and a year later the village was incorporated. The historic and renowned Blyth Festival Theatre began in 1975, and still remains the largest tourism draw for the village, attracting thousands throughout the summer months. Blyth was amalgamated into the Township of North Huron in 2001, along with the former Town of Wingham and ward of East Wawanosh.



Figure 3: Boundary of CIP Study Area (Wingham, ON)



Figure 4: Boundary of CIP Study Area (Blyth, ON)

Section 2: Planning Act

Section 28 of the Ontario Planning Act allows municipalities, where there are provisions in its Official Plan relating to community improvement, to designate by By-law a “Community Improvement Project Area”, and prepare a “Community Improvement Plan”.

Section 28(1) of the Planning Act defines community improvement as “the planning or replanning, design or redesign, re-subdivision, clearance, development or redevelopment, construction, reconstruction and rehabilitation, improvement of energy efficiency, or any of them, of a community improvement project area, and the provision of such residential, commercial, industrial, public, recreational, institutional, religious, charitable or other uses, buildings, structures, works, improvements or facilities, or spaces therefore, as may be appropriate or necessary”.

Section 28 of the Planning Act establishes and defines the term “community improvement project area” as “a municipality or an area within a municipality, the community improvement of which in the opinion of the council is desirable because of age, dilapidation, overcrowding, faulty arrangement, unsuitability of buildings or for any other environmental, social or community economic development reason” (S. 28(1)).

Section 28(2) states that the Municipality may, by by-law, designate all or part of the Municipality as a community improvement project area.

Once a community improvement project area has been designated, a community improvement plan can be prepared for that area. A Municipality may use a community improvement plan to:

- acquire, hold, clear, grade or otherwise prepare land;
- construct, repair, rehabilitate or improve buildings on land acquired or held by the municipality;
- sell, lease or dispose of any land and buildings acquired or held by the municipality; and/or
- make grants or loans to owners and tenants of land and buildings within the community improvement project area to help them pay for the cost of rehabilitating their lands or building

Section 3: Official Plan

The North Huron Official Plan provides policies to guide land use decisions throughout the Township. North Huron's CIP must conform to the policies of the Official Plan. The relevant policies related to North Huron and the preparation of a CIP are discussed below.

a) Goals and Objectives

The North Huron Official plan provides a framework where specific goals and objectives of community improvement are outlined. The following policies which outline community improvement goals and objectives are found within the North Huron Official Plan:

Goals (Section 10.3.3)

- a) To encourage, support and aid in the co-ordination of private efforts to rehabilitate and/or redevelop property, which will have a positive impact on the well-being of the community, such as downtown revitalization, intensification, heritage preservation, affordable housing, high quality urban design and brownfield requirements.
 - b) To improve the physical appearance and environmental condition of the community,
 - c) To foster community pride,
 - d) To attract business investment and new residents to the Township, and
- To involve the public in identifying areas needing of community improvement, what deficiencies exist and the improvement and rehabilitation priorities.

b) Project Area Selection Criteria

The Official Plan also provides guidance on the selection of community improvement project area by outlining specific criteria for project area selection. The following policy is found in the Official Plan:

Project Area Selection Criteria (Section 10.3.4.2)

In determining the location of a Community Improvement Project Area and preparation of a Community Improvement Plan, one or more of the following conditions shall exist:

- a) Buildings (including façades), structures, and / or properties which are of heritage or architectural significance in need of preservation, restoration, repair, rehabilitation or redevelopment,
- b) Built or natural heritage resources in need of preservation or renewal,
- c) Areas where elements of the natural heritage or parks system present opportunities for municipal improvements that would encourage redevelopment and improved recreational facilities for the community,
- d) Non-conforming or incompatible land uses or activities,
- e) Deficiencies in physical infrastructure or community facilities and services,
- f) Lack of public and private parking facilities
- g) Areas susceptible to flooding and requiring protection,
- h) An inadequate mix of housing types,
- i) Known or perceived environmental contamination (i.e. brownfields),
- j) Poor visual quality, including streetscape and design,
- k) High industrial or commercial vacancy rates,
- l) Any other relevant social, economic, or environmental reason, and / or
- m) Demonstrated support by residents and taxpayers of the area.

Maps (Figures 1 & 2) showing the proposed Community Improvement Project Areas can be found in the Executive Summary and Section 1.

Section 4: SWOT Analysis

A preliminary strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis has been undertaken to identify the types of issues and opportunities that the CIP may address. The SWOT analysis was primarily based on the policy review as well as site visits. Further issues and opportunities may be identified as the study progresses and consultations are undertaken with members of the public.

Strengths

- Blyth library, post office, and theatre are all located within the downtown core, bringing residents and visitors to the area

- Wingham library, post office and museum located all within the downtown core, bringing residents and visitors to the area
- Blyth's Memorial Hall recently underwent renovations to improve the exterior's architectural and accessibility features
- Sidewalks include accessibility features such as tactile paving and a generous amount of curb cuts and level paving
- Cruickshank Park in Wingham is pedestrian friendly and adds a well maintained green space with tree cover and benches
- Greenway trail, historic Bainton's Mill, Maitland River parklands, and many residences are located within a short walking distance from the downtown cores
- Zoning permits a range of uses in the downtown cores and generally provides for an appropriate built form
- Attractive additions such as landscaping, hanging flower baskets and planters
- Grocery store is located downtown in Blyth which brings shoppers to the downtown core on a regular basis
- Street lamps are visually appealing and add a consistent design element in the downtown core
- On-street parking is available throughout the downtown cores with some specifically marked as accessible parking spaces
- Attractive and distinctive historic architecture is prevalent throughout the communities and downtown cores
- Buildings create a defined street edge in many parts of the downtown cores
- Wide boulevard sidewalks that allow for accessible pedestrian movement and the occasional sign or street furniture

Examples of Strengths in Wingham and Blyth:

A variety of unique and historic architectural buildings and features are present in Wingham and Blyth:



On street parking is available throughout Wingham and Blyth and the sidewalks are accessible, newly paved and include tactile paving:



Cruickshank Park in Wingham is pedestrian friendly and adds a well-maintained green space with lots of tree cover and benches:



Wide boulevard sidewalks that allow for accessible pedestrian movement and the occasional sign or street furniture:



Weaknesses

- Many buildings lack accessible entries
- Many buildings are not maintained to the same standard as others
- Many buildings have had the original architectural detailing altered (cladding, painting, windows etc.)
- With exception to a few buildings, signage is inconsistent, unattractive and non-reflective of historic character
- Poor mix and range of amenities and business within downtown core which may cause residents to shop elsewhere
- Different building heights create an inconsistent streetscape and inability to provide architectural details
- Lack of pedestrian crossings may cause issues with pedestrian safety, especially in Blyth where there are no identified crosswalks or traffic lights
- Only a few benches and streetscape furniture are present in the cores

Examples of Weaknesses in Wingham and Blyth:

Different building heights create an inconsistent streetscape and inability to provide architectural details



Many buildings in the downtown core do not have universally accessible entries:



A lack of stop signs or crosswalks may cause dangerous situations for pedestrians:



Opportunities

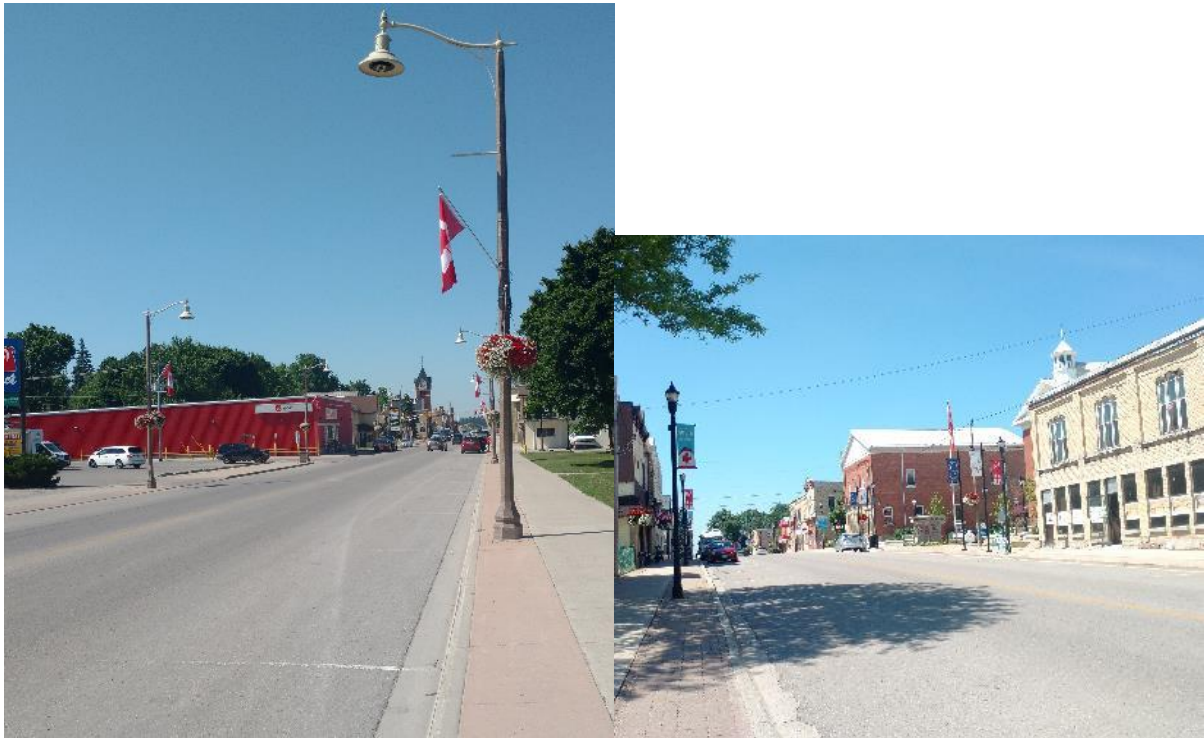
- Existing vacant buildings located within the downtown cores provide opportunity for additional retail, services, or community facilities
- The wide sidewalks along Josephine and Queen Streets could potentially accommodate streetscape improvements such as the addition of street trees, gardens and furniture
- Implementation of vegetation and streetscape features would benefit pedestrian comfort and help to minimize impacts from traffic
- Large brick walls provide opportunity for art such as wall murals
- Implementing crosswalks at main points in the downtown cores (particularly Blyth) would increase pedestrian safety and force traffic to slow down, possibly causing drivers to slow down and take a better look at what the downtown businesses have to offer
- Improvements to accessibility are possible, such as the addition of ramps or other entryway improvements
- Opportunities to help restore original architectural character or buildings and streetscape through rehabilitation, cleaning and maintenance
- Opportunity to construct decorative signs or additions such as awnings or lighting to liven downtown atmosphere and create a consistent theme or historic period for building details

Examples of Opportunities in Wingham and Blyth:

Improvements to accessibility are possible, such as the addition of ramps or other entryway improvements, as seen here for Part II Bistro in Blyth:



Crosswalks would increase pedestrian safety:



An example of appealing landscaping is beside the Citizen offices on Dinsley St in Blyth:



There are many opportunities to rehabilitate, restore and improve existing historic buildings and properties:



Threats

- Existing vacant retail units in the cores may indicate a lack of commercial demand or high turnover rates for local businesses
- Poorly-maintained building façades are visually unappealing and may discourage shoppers
- Lack of traffic controls may cause a danger to pedestrians crossing the street and create an unpleasant pedestrian environment
- Wingham may still lack sufficient on-street parking for the demand of peak hours

Examples of Threats in North Huron:

Vacant buildings may be an indication of a lack of demand for commercial land uses:



Many buildings in the downtown cores are in need of façade improvement:



Section 5: Basis for the CIP

The preparation of the Community Improvement Plan, should be based on a well-thought out strategy that is considerate of local planning policy, critical needs and community input. The following sections identify preliminary options and considerations that will provide the foundation for the CIP's structure, focus and implementation.

a) Critical Needs Assessment

The CIP should provide incentives and municipal leadership strategies that relate directly to the community's critical needs. The critical needs are the key issues and opportunities that have the most impact on revitalization.

Summary of Critical Needs

The following is a summary of critical needs, or priority issues and opportunities, that the North Huron CIP should help to address, based upon the policy review and SWOT analysis.

- Improve visual state of buildings in the downtown core*

The CIP study areas are dominated by buildings with distinctive architectural styles and valuable historic attributes. While some of these buildings appear to be well maintained, strategies to implement façade improvements, rehabilitation, clean-up and maintenance should be developed to improve the many buildings which have been neglected. Opportunities for property improvements and landscaping are also recommended.
- Support the creation of a barrier-free pedestrian environment*

Accessibility barriers are prominent within the downtown cores of Wingham and Blyth. Many businesses only provide access via a set of steps or stairs, which create a physical accessibility barrier for many people with disabilities. Some measures to accommodate people with disabilities are provided in Blyth and Wingham, such as

ramps, automatic doors, or grading paving of the sidewalk to the doorways. Many other improvements can be made to ensure that mobility is not restricted. This may be accomplished by including incentives in the CIP which will encourage property owners to make improvements to their property, such as the installation of wheelchair ramps or automatic doors, for example.

- *Improve pedestrian safety and public realm aesthetics*

A critical need emerging from the SWOT analysis is the overall sense of comfort and safety along the sidewalk, particularly along Queen Street, where there is a consistent level of through traffic and truck traffic. The main intersections in the Blyth downtown core would benefit from pedestrian safety improvements such as crosswalks. The lack of a distinct location for pedestrians to safely cross Queen Street may slightly discourage visitors and tourists to explore the whole downtown core. In addition, the sidewalks and the pedestrian realm in the both of the downtown cores would greatly benefit from a more consistent, decorative treatment. This may be accomplished, through streetscape improvements, such as, the addition of street trees, flower boxes, hardscaped gardens, and furniture. These would also act as a buffer between the sidewalk and street and would further improve the safety and comfort of pedestrians. In Wingham there are existing traffic lights that provide pedestrian crossing opportunities.

b) Options for Incentive Programs

A wide range of financial incentive programs may be offered to landowners and tenants through a CIP. Based on the SWOT analysis and identified critical needs, the following financial incentive options are recommended for the Municipality's consideration to be included in the Draft:

- A façade improvement grant/loan program to encourage the improvement of building façades, signage and properties in conformity with specific streetscape guidelines;
- An accessibility improvement grant/loan program, including grants for the addition of wheelchair ramps or other accessibility features, particularly on commercial properties.

c) Considerations for Eligibility Criteria

It is important to consider eligibility criteria for the incentives, to ensure that only desirable projects that are in the public interest are eligible for public funding. In order to receive funding, applicants will need to demonstrate compliance with the eligibility criteria, by describing their proposal, obtaining quotes for the work, and supplying drawings or plans to illustrate the intent.

The eligibility criteria should address:

- Program-specific requirements, such as compliance with heritage building regulations, eligible types of projects, application submission requirements (quotes, drawings, etc.);
- Applicability of the incentive programs to ensure that programs relate to the identified issues, opportunities, and critical needs;
- An evaluation of whether the proposed improvements support active transportation choices, to promote mobility (i.e., relationship to sidewalk, comfortable pedestrian environment and connections, provision of bike parking, etc.) as well as improved accessibility for seniors and people with disabilities;
- That the applicant has considered opportunities to implement recommended streetscape improvements and public realm improvements, where it is feasible and reasonable; and
- Other general eligibility requirements. It is important that minimum standards are established for improvements to historic properties and buildings, infrastructure, and streetscapes to assist in decision-making. The CIP will therefore prescribe general guidelines to provide direction when considering various applications.

d) CIP Administration

In addition to supporting the financial incentives, the Township of North Huron could also participate directly in the revitalization of Blyth and Wingham, through the following recommendations:

- Designate a CIP administrator to administer the CIP on a day-to-day basis, including:
 - meeting with potential applicants for the financial incentive programs;
 - processing applications in accordance with the CIP's policies;
 - circulating incentive applications to the committee and liaising with the committee and applicants;
 - administering the marketing program in the CIP (discussed below) and the monitoring and evaluation program (discussed below); and
 - ensuring implementation of the projects recommended as part of the municipal leadership strategy, including liaising with Council and with responsible departments.

- Develop streetscape and architectural guidelines for new façade and property improvements, to ensure they are compatible with and sensitive to the historic characteristics of the cores
- Implement a marketing and communications program which may include an education program regarding heritage conservation and property maintenance
- North Huron Council should also consider the administration role that the Economic Development Committee would play in the implementation of the CIP

e) Budgeting for Incentives and Municipal Leadership Projects

Implementation of the CIP is largely carried out through Council's annual budgeting process. Each year, Council may set aside funding to support the financial incentives. Should there be funding remaining at the end of the year, the remaining funds may be carried over to the following year or set aside for municipal leadership projects.

Budgeting for municipal leadership projects may be completed separately from the financial incentives. Consideration may be made to planning and executing projects based on priority, available funding resources and available staff resources.

f) Options for the Community Improvement Project Area

A community improvement project area must be selected in accordance with the Planning Act. The authority under Section 28 of the Act is only permitted within an area designated by Council as a community improvement project area.

The community improvement project area may consist of the whole study area, or a portion of the study area. It is commonly recommended that selection of the Community Improvement Project Area should focus resources within priority areas and be considerate of anticipated resources available to implement the Plan. It is also noted that the visible benefits that the CIP will provide will be enhanced if the Community Project Area is concentrated in close proximity. A large number of eligible properties may not be desirable, as it could possibly "dilute" the incentives across a broad area, resulting in a lack of visible benefits that the CIP should provide.

As such, it is recommended that the Community Improvement Project Area be focused on the properties in the commercial cores of downtown Wingham and Blyth (as seen in Figures 1 & 2).

Section 7: Conclusion

An analysis of provincial and local policy as well as critical needs in North Huron indicates that the two identified settlement areas would significantly benefit from a community improvement plan. Municipal investment in the form of grants will be beneficial, in conjunction with private investment from property owners and provincial funding. A key to the success of the CIP will be integration and coordination with the community and private property owners, and an emphasis on initiatives that promote maintaining the unique attributes of Wingham and Blyth. Façade and structural improvements as well as enhancements to the pedestrian realm should be emphasized as an important aspect of the CIP, including accessibility for seniors and people with disabilities, streetscape improvements and pedestrian safety improvements. This will ensure that the Wingham and Blyth downtown cores and their surrounding areas remain aesthetically appealing, comfortable, vibrant, attractive and livable.

This report will be refined based on consultation with stakeholders, the public, and Council, and finalized for the Statutory Public Meeting and Council adoption. It is intended that this report will form the basis for discussing potential programs and issues that may be addressed by the CIP, and become the basis for the CIP.