

BRINGING BACK THE FARM

Lana Hall

A development proposal for a site in the Town of the Blue Mountains could bring a unique model of sustainable living to the town, pairing housing plots with a small-scale farming cooperative. It could also give younger generations of Grey County residents an opportunity to live on the land where they grow their own food.

Located at the southeast corner of Grey County Road 40 and Grey County Road 2, the 152-acre site is composed of two adjacent land parcels, one which was previously approved in 2002 for an 18-hole executive golf course development, the other the **Houghton Family Orchard** lands. Development firm **Castlepoint Numa** has submitted a zoning by-law amendment application to the **Town of the Blue Mountains** to redevelop the site with a “dynamic, community-scale agricultural co-operative program,” which would be referred to as **Thornbury Acres**, according to a planning report prepared by **MHBC Planning**.

Castlepoint Numa proposes to develop 37 homesteads on the site, each spanning between one and two acres. The remainder of the site would accommodate approximately

51 acres of agricultural space and 38 acres of recreational space. The agricultural area would contain fruit orchards, forest, a market garden, space for rotating crops such as squash, beans and corn, a bee apiary and a community food market. The homesteads, recreational amenities and seven kilometres of walking trails would be accessed by a new private vehicle road system. Each homestead would contain a dwelling unit, a septic tank and an individual garden plot, which residents would have the option of consulting with an externally-hired farm manager

on in response to their family’s own requirements.

In **Grey County’s** official plan, locationally appropriate housing can be developed in rural areas under a few different designations, according to MHBC Planning vice-president and partner, **David McKay**. One of those designations is called “innovative farm practices,” which seemed like a perfect description for a project like this.

“They didn’t define it, and it’s never been used,” McKay says of the designation. “So [Castlepoint Numa] looked at it and said ‘If we take this portion

of the rural designated lands, we can really bring something that brings people closer to their food production and really integrates them.” To meet the criteria for redevelopment, they opted to propose something called a “residential farm cooperative,” which requires that at least 60 per cent of the site be used for farming purposes.

Castlepoint Numa partner **Harley Valentine** says the proposed development’s economic viability had to be carefully considered to ensure its sustainability, especially considering the unique model it would operate under. Each homestead would pay monthly fees, which would entitle them to a certain amount of produce

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Map showing a site in the Town of the Blue Mountains that Castlepoint Numa is proposing to redevelop as a “residential farm cooperative”. Composed of two sites, a property once planned for an 18-hole golf course (parcel 1) and the Houghton Family Orchard lands (parcel 2), the 152-acre site would accommodate 37 homesteads and over 50 acres of agricultural space, including rotating crops, orchards, nut forests and a bee apiary. Homestead residents would pay membership / condominium fees to reside on the site and have access to its amenities.

SOURCE: MHBC PLANNING

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produced on the farm, such as berries, nuts and seasonal vegetables, as well as anything grown on their own homestead.

Ideally, says Valentine, the larger-scale crops would produce excess, which would then be sold at an on-site farmer's market or sold to local food and beverage operators to generate extra revenue for the farm.

A central event space on the property would provide opportunities for workshops or other community events.

"It's a business, but we also want it to be a launchpad for education, for information and training on small-scale agriculture and regenerative farming," says Valentine. "We've put forward what we feel is a very sensitive approach, a very thoughtful approach through our research on small-scale

agricultural farming."

The site, though it's referred to as a "cooperative" under the official plan, will actually be designated as a condominium. Much like in a downtown high-rise, residents will pay a monthly fee, which will go towards maintenance and a reserve fund.

The legal structure of a condominium, says Valentine, will offer the property more protection than either a subdivision or a traditional cooperative designation would. "That's what protects the farm, that's what protects the vision of this community in perpetuity," he says, "that obligation to commit to those fees year-in and year-out, so that this farm has a budget and capital expense to carry the farm manager, the annual maintenance of the growing

cycle, the same way it covers roads and garbage."

Valentine also notes that as part of the application, Castlepoint Numa assembled an agricultural advisory board, which included a local farmer in Grey County and a professional agronomist who authored an agricultural viability report to accompany the development application. The report detailed suggestions for crop varieties and agricultural feasibility as it relates to climate change and frost cycles, "just to really give the staff and council comfort that this thing is fully-baked," he says.

Many of the town's existing farmers are reaching retirement age, so the proposed development could allow farming opportunities for a new generation of families at a time when conversations about food security and reliance on global supply chains are increasing. Houghton Family Orchard owner **Kathleen Houghton** says the development is an ideal way to maintain the area's dwindling farmland, while

providing unique opportunities for a growing demographic interested in small-scale agriculture.

"If you drive around the area that's close to [the proposed development], all of the farmland that's being bought is being turned into large home and estate properties, so the agricultural use of the property is of no value to those landowners," she told *NRU*. "There are several small-scale organic farms in the area that are thriving, that wouldn't have survived 10 years ago. I think people are looking for locally grown, organically-grown, sustainable food sources, and they're willing to pay for it. I don't think that existed ten years ago."

Houghton says she herself would love to be one of the first residents living in the new agricultural cooperative.

"I think it's a really timely, interesting concept," she says. "The thought of living where my food is being grown is incredibly exciting." 🌱



Rendering of the 152-acre site proposed to be developed by Castlepoint Numa as the new Thornbury Acres farming cooperative. The cooperative would provide housing, as well as unique opportunities for residents to engage in small-scale agricultural farming on their own garden plots and through access to the site's crops, orchards and on-site farmer's market.

SOURCE: CASTLEPOINT NUMA
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT: NAK DESIGN