

Rachel Gilliland | Candidate for Deputy Mayor | October 2026

1. Why are you running?

I'm running for Deputy Mayor because I believe The Blue Mountains is at a turning point. We have so much to be proud of, from our agricultural roots and thriving tourism economy to our small businesses, beautiful natural surroundings and the people who make this community what it is.

But we also have some serious challenges ahead. Our financial outlook, aging infrastructure, pressures from growth, changes in senior leadership and concerns about transparency and public trust. These are issues that need more than good intentions. They need experience, sound judgment and a willingness to make some tough decisions.

I've spent the past eight years serving in elected municipal office, and I know firsthand how important it is to get the fundamentals right. Good financial planning, accountability, strong relationships and knowing how to work with people to get things done.

I'm proud of my track record. I haven't just talked about ideas. I've brought forward motions, challenged decisions when necessary, built relationships across all levels of government and worked to deliver meaningful results.

I want to bring that experience to The Blue Mountains. To help get our financial house in order, restore confidence in how decisions are made and make sure we're protecting what matters to our community while planning responsibly for what's next.

2. What current or past experience do you have that you believe applies to municipal governance?

I bring eight years of elected municipal experience from Aurora, including service in the rotating Deputy Mayor role.

During that time, I served on numerous boards and committees including chairing fire services, economic development, policing, environmental stewardship and handling multi million dollar municipal budgets.

I've been fortunate to work alongside a Treasurer who came from the Region of York, and implemented best practices most small to mid-sized towns have not considered such as; long-term capital planning, in-term asset management, reserve investment strategies and fiscal sustainability.

I've also personally developed and submitted more than 40 motions and policy initiatives for Council consideration, addressing everything from financial accountability and transparency to environmental protection, economic development and community safety. I believe leadership is measured by actions and results, not simply words and good intentions.

As a local business owner, I understand the importance of managing costs, making difficult decisions and supporting a healthy local economy.

My experience also extends to working directly with federal and provincial leaders and bringing key decision-makers to the table. During the pandemic, I helped bring together tourism and business stakeholders with senior provincial officials, including the Minister of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture sectors and the Deputy Premier and Minister of Health, to advocate for critical support during one of the industry's most difficult periods. I didn't just support the industry, I brought important people together to make a difference during their darkest times.

I was also invited to contribute to provincial legislative reform through The Women of Ontario Say No movement. After years of advocacy, working with the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, lobbying all political parties, AMO, and contributing to multiple legislative drafts, our collective efforts helped achieve the passage of Bill 9, the Municipal Accountability Act, in 2026.

These experiences reflect my ability to build relationships across all levels of government, bring people together and help turn advocacy into meaningful action and results.

Municipal government is complex, and I bring practical experience in how decisions are developed, funded, implemented and held accountable.

3. Why do you believe you will be an effective decision-maker for The Town of the Blue Mountains?

Effective decision-making requires more than good intentions. It requires understanding municipal processes, asking difficult questions, evaluating financial consequences and building consensus around practical solutions. That matters.

I've spent eight years doing exactly that.

I understand the difference between a good idea and a financially sustainable one. I also understand that Council's role is to establish policy, set priorities, provide oversight and hold administration accountable for delivering results.

I'm comfortable challenging recommendations when necessary, but I also recognize that respectful relationships with colleagues, staff, residents and other levels of government are essential to getting things accomplished.

I believe decisions should be evidence-based, transparent and informed by their long-term consequences, rather than simply what appears affordable or convenient today.

Most importantly, I have a proven track record of bringing forward initiatives for Council consideration, working through the municipal process and advocating for meaningful results.

4. What can a municipality do to help address cost of living concerns?

While municipalities cannot control inflation, interest rates or grocery prices, they can influence several significant costs affecting households.

First, we need disciplined municipal spending and predictable taxation. Keeping operating costs under control and avoiding preventable infrastructure overruns helps reduce pressure on residents.

Second, housing affordability requires more than simply approving additional development. We need a broader range of housing options, including additional residential units, smaller homes, attainable ownership opportunities and purpose-built rental housing. And a Council brave enough to vote in favour of good projects that fit.

Third, transportation is a major household expense, particularly in rural communities. Improving regional transit connections and exploring appropriately regulated rideshare options could help residents access employment, health care and essential services without relying entirely on personal vehicles.

We can also review development and permitting processes, eliminate unnecessary delays and consider targeted incentives that support attainable housing and local business investment.

The municipality cannot solve the affordability crisis alone, but it can make responsible decisions that avoid adding unnecessary costs to living and working here.

5. What is your view on the current tax rate in The Town of the Blue Mountains?

I believe the discussion needs to focus not only on the tax rate, but also on the sustainability of the spending and financial decisions behind it.

The Town's approved 2026 budget included a 4.34% increase in the municipal tax levy requirement under its recommended budget. That's a meaningful increase at a time when residents and businesses are already facing rising costs.

My concern is not simply one year's increase, but the cumulative impact of operating pressures, significant capital commitments, infrastructure needs and declining financial flexibility.

I would support a more disciplined approach to operating expenditures, stronger capital project oversight, multi-year financial forecasts and a clear strategy to rebuild and protect reserves.

We should also distinguish between costs required to maintain essential municipal services and discretionary spending that can be reconsidered, phased or deferred.

I won't promise arbitrary tax freezes without understanding their consequences. What I will commit to is scrutinizing expenditures, challenging assumptions and working toward a sustainable, predictable tax burden that residents can reasonably afford.

6. In your opinion, what is the No. 1 issue facing The Town of the Blue Mountains?

Financial sustainability. It underpins almost every other challenge facing our municipality.

We need to maintain aging infrastructure, accommodate growth, protect our natural environment, deliver essential services and support our local economy. But none of those priorities can be achieved sustainably without a sound financial foundation.

I'm particularly concerned about the long-term implications of major capital commitments, pressure on reserves and the municipality's ability to manage future operating costs.

We need to understand not only what projects cost to build, but what they will cost to operate, maintain and eventually replace.

My priority would be to strengthen capital planning, establish clear financial performance measures, review spending pressures and develop a credible long-term fiscal strategy.

Restoring financial stability also means restoring public confidence that municipal decisions are transparent, well researched and accountable.

We cannot afford to govern one budget year at a time.

7. A regional transit study is currently being undertaken involving Bruce, Grey, Dufferin and Wellington counties. What should a regional transit system look like and how should it be funded?

I support a practical, coordinated regional transportation network that recognizes the unique needs of our rural communities. We don't necessarily need large buses travelling everywhere. We need reliable, affordable connections to employment, health care, shopping and essential services.

A combination of scheduled intercommunity routes, smaller vehicles, accessible transportation and on-demand services would provide greater flexibility, particularly for seniors, youth, workers and residents without access to a vehicle.

The regional transit study involving Grey, Bruce, Dufferin and Wellington counties is an important step forward. The Province has committed up to \$9.5 million toward a coordinated transit network, and the draft regional study explores fixed routes, on-demand services, shared resources and partnerships with existing transit providers.

Closer to home, Beaver Valley Outreach (BVO) presented its Community Transportation Survey findings to Council in August 2026, reinforcing the transportation challenges facing local residents. These findings deserve to be incorporated into regional planning so that The Blue Mountains' specific needs are not overlooked.

I've already taken steps to advance this issue, including communicating directly with the TBM CAO to encourage the Town's participation in regional transportation consultations and exploring opportunities through provincial rideshare frameworks and regional partnerships.

Funding should be shared appropriately among the Province, counties, municipalities and other partners, supplemented by reasonable fares. Just as importantly, we need clear operating cost projections and a sustainable funding plan beyond the initial provincial commitment.

My priority is a connected, accessible and financially responsible system that people will actually use, not simply another study that sits on a shelf.

8. How would you address the need to maintain municipal services and infrastructure, without high tax increases for residents?

We need to move beyond simply managing annual budgets and focus on long-term financial sustainability, stronger cost controls and getting better value from every tax dollar.

During my eight years, I gained valuable experience with financial strategies that strengthened reserves, improved capital planning and created greater predictability for taxpayers. I would bring that experience to The Blue Mountains.

One opportunity worth serious consideration is the Municipal Services Corporation (MSC) model, particularly for water and wastewater services. I believe it has potential, but the business case must clearly demonstrate the financial and operational benefits, identify which municipalities or partners could benefit, and ensure accountability, service quality and affordability remain protected. Shared expertise, infrastructure planning and economies of scale could provide meaningful long-term efficiencies.

I would also explore ONE Investment's Joint Investment Board, which allows municipalities to pool investment expertise and pursue more diversified, professionally managed investment strategies. Understanding whether this model could improve returns on eligible long-term reserves, while managing risk and protecting liquidity, is worth examining.

Equally important are disciplined capital project oversight, preventative maintenance, reviewing operating costs, procurement efficiencies and prioritizing essential infrastructure over discretionary spending.

Council must understand not only what projects cost today, but their long-term impact on reserves, operating budgets and future tax increases.

The goal isn't simply to spend less. It's to manage our resources more strategically, explore partnerships that deliver measurable value, protect essential services and reduce unnecessary financial pressure on taxpayers.

9. How can a municipality prepare for the possibility of artificial intelligence data centre developments in the coming years?

My priority would be protecting The Blue Mountains from the potential environmental and infrastructure impacts of large-scale data centres, particularly given the pressures we already face with water, wastewater capacity and responsible growth.

These facilities can place significant demands on electricity, water resources and local infrastructure, while potentially generating noise and other environmental concerns. We need to be cautious about developments that could compete with the needs of our residents, businesses and agricultural community.

At the same time, I recognize that municipal staff resources are already stretched. I would not advocate for an extensive new study without a demonstrated need. Instead, I would support a focused review of our existing Official Plan and zoning provisions to identify any gaps, establish appropriate safeguards and ensure Council has the tools to respond should an application come forward.

We should also leverage provincial guidance, existing planning policies and expertise from neighbouring municipalities rather than reinventing the wheel.

The Blue Mountains should not be left vulnerable to developments that could compromise our water resources, agricultural lands, natural environment or infrastructure capacity. Being prepared doesn't require excessive spending or staff time. It requires having the right protections in place before decisions are forced upon us.

10. What can a municipality do to help increase housing supply across the affordability spectrum?

Housing affordability requires creative solutions and strong partnerships because the needs of young families, seniors, workers and first-time buyers are very different.

Municipalities need to create the right conditions for housing investment, particularly within existing serviced areas, while protecting our environment, agricultural lands and infrastructure capacity.

Through my experience, I've worked with developers exploring innovative approaches to homeownership. One example is Hartman Square, where the developer is offering a shared-equity model to help first-time buyers overcome the financial barriers of purchasing a home. It's the kind of creative, private-sector solution worth exploring.

I also believe we should explore opportunities to work with developers who are prepared to make meaningful commitments to attainable housing. Where modest adjustments to existing development permissions may be appropriate, they should deliver clear community benefits while respecting neighbourhood character, environmental protections and infrastructure capacity. The objective is not simply more development, but housing that meets the needs of our community.

We should also make better use of the tools we already have. The Blue Mountains' updated Community Improvement Plan (CIP) provides an opportunity to encourage attainable housing through targeted financial incentives. I would like to see us maximize these programs, remove unnecessary barriers and work with developers and investors who can deliver meaningful results. Success should be measured by the number of genuinely attainable homes created, not simply the number of development approvals issued.

Other opportunities include additional residential units, smaller housing forms, purpose-built rentals and more efficient planning and permitting processes. I'm also open to exploring four units as-of-right in appropriate fully serviced areas, subject to servicing capacity and neighbourhood considerations.

Partnerships with Grey County, nonprofit housing providers and the private sector will also be important, particularly when it comes to affordable and supportive housing.

Ultimately, our goal should be to create more homes people can genuinely afford, using creative partnerships and existing municipal tools, while protecting the character, environment and quality of life that make The Blue Mountains special.

11. How will you manage growth while protecting the natural beauty and character of the town?

I believe responsible growth and environmental protection must go hand in hand. The Blue Mountains' natural heritage, agricultural lands, and Georgian Bay shoreline are among our greatest assets. Protecting them needs to be at the forefront of our planning decisions.

My background in landscape design and architecture, along with eight years of municipal experience and involvement in environmental initiatives, has given me a strong understanding of how land-use decisions affect our natural systems, established neighbourhoods and community character.

One accomplishment I'm particularly proud of is helping champion a Stable Neighbourhoods policy. We moved beyond simply talking about protecting established neighbourhoods and put meaningful planning tools in place, including zoning protections and neighbourhood-specific urban design guidelines. These helped ensure that new construction and additions respect the existing character, scale and design of surrounding homes. It's a practical example of protecting community character while allowing appropriate change.

I would bring that same approach to The Blue Mountains. Our Official Plan must be more than an aspirational document. It needs to guide decisions consistently, with clear planning policies, environmental protections and appropriate servicing requirements.

Growth should be directed toward suitable existing settlement areas where infrastructure can support it, rather than unnecessarily expanding into agricultural or environmentally sensitive lands.

I also believe we should move beyond simply identifying natural assets and begin incorporating their protection, valuation and long-term stewardship into municipal asset management and financial planning. Protecting farmland, strengthening heritage conservation and preserving the walkable, distinctive character of Thornbury, Clarksburg and our other communities must remain priorities.

Growth will happen, but how we manage it is a choice. **I've always believed meaningful leadership requires more than good intentions. It requires taking action, following through and delivering results.**

My goal is to accommodate the needs of future generations without compromising the very qualities that make The Blue Mountains such a special place to call home.

12. Three infrastructure projects this year were roughly estimated at a collective \$19 million over budget. How would you help ensure project budgets don't see large unexpected increases in the future?

The approximately \$19 million in budget increases associated with the Craighleith Main Lift Station, Mill Street Sewage Pumping Station and Bay-Grey Street reconstruction projects raises serious concerns about capital project planning, oversight and financial accountability.

In my experience, effective project oversight begins long before construction. Council needs realistic cost estimates, sufficiently developed engineering designs, appropriate contingencies and a clear understanding of potential risks before approving major financial commitments.

Drawing on my eight years of municipal experience, I recognize the value of strong, independent project management expertise protecting the municipality's interests throughout construction.

Equally important is a rigorous change-order process. Not every additional cost submitted by a contractor necessarily represents a legitimate change in scope. Proposed changes must be thoroughly reviewed, justified and supported by alternatives before taxpayers are expected to absorb additional costs. Clear dispute-resolution procedures and proactive purchasing strategies can also help manage financial exposure.

I would advocate for standardized capital project reporting to Council, identifying original budgets, revised forecasts, emerging risks, schedule changes and potential impacts on reserves. Significant cost pressures should be brought forward early, not after financial commitments have escalated.

I gained valuable experience working within financial governance structures that emphasized long-term capital planning, dedicated financial oversight and reserve management. These are practices I would bring to The Blue Mountains.

We must also recognize that some cost increases are unavoidable, particularly with unforeseen site conditions and market volatility. However, Council must be able to distinguish legitimate additional costs from shortcomings in project planning, estimating or oversight.

My approach is to establish realistic budgets, challenge costs when warranted, identify risks early and ensure accountability at every stage. Taxpayers deserve confidence that every reasonable effort is being made to protect their investment, and they should never be left questioning how major cost overruns occurred or why they weren't identified sooner.