



Township of Muskoka Lakes

Mayor's Message

February 2021

Dear Residents:

On behalf of Council and staff, I would like to wish you a happy and prosperous New Year.

Despite the fact we are in a provincial "lock down", as I look out my window at a snow covered lake, I realize that I am blessed to be here, have the ability to connect via Zoom as needed and that Muskoka remains relatively Covid-19 free. As this pandemic reshapes our thinking, our relationships, the way we do business and our social and economic futures, this past year has been an emotional roller-coaster ride not just for Muskoka, but the whole world. In view of this, my comments from last spring bear repeating. This pandemic has polarized emotions, thinking and behaviour, and regardless of the direction our Provincial or Federal Government has taken, Township Council and staff are managing to continue to move municipal business forward to the best of all our abilities. Let's all remain respectful for differing opinions and views as we continue down this uncharted road.

2021 Property Tax Bill

Included in this envelope (if you are not on a monthly pre-authorized payment plan) is your 2021 interim tax bill. As per the Municipal Act, the amount calculated for this installment is 50% of your 2020 tax levy. In June, we will be sending out the final tax bills that will include any taxation adjustments required for 2021.

With the Township Office closed due to Covid-19, alternatives methods for paying your taxes are available, including pre-authorized monthly payments and credit card options (subject to a processing fee). Questions regarding payments or to update any information regarding your accounts, please contact the Tax Department at 705-765-3156 or email propertytax@tomls.ca.

Township Services

As part of our response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Township of Muskoka Lakes reinvented the way we do business. On March 17, 2020 the office doors were closed to the public and remain so today, but business as "unusual" continues. While there have been bumps along the way, in some respects it has gotten better. Technology has allowed connections online from around the world to our Council meetings, especially on the most pressing of issues. To that end, I want to say a very public thank you to our staff, with special appreciation for our senior leadership team who have worked tirelessly to respond with solutions in a state of evolving change. If any of you do happen to engage with our staff either on the phone or via zoom, please take a moment to thank them for their service. The staff of Muskoka Lakes are truly the backbone of business and their efforts should be recognized.

The other unsung heroes over the past 10 months are your respective Councillors. Council, despite not meeting in person, have met frequently and tackled

some very heavy topics this year as I will touch on later in this letter. Most importantly, they have conducted debate with respect, integrity, diligence and dedication to each of you on so many topics. They too deserve accolades, as dealing with floods in 2019 and a world-wide pandemic in 2020 was certainly not in their job descriptions when they "signed up" for Council in 2018.

Official Plan Review

Despite the challenges of Zoom technology, your Council, with the help of a citizen Steering Committee, have set the stage for a new Township Official Plan. This document should be available for public comment late spring or early summer of 2021. Please check the dedicated online engagement portal for updates and provide your comments. This Official Plan will help ensure we have sound and distinct planning policies to respond to rapidly changing redevelopment practices that can threaten the long term future of Muskoka's Natural and Cultural Environment.

Another item of interest regarding re-development, is that Council continues to work closely with stakeholders to find a more balanced and respectful development proposal for the entire Resort Village of Minett. We anticipate that by the spring of 2021, there will be a draft Official Plan Amendment ready for public comment so please check the Township website. I am sure all of our ratepayer groups will also be alerting the public – stay tuned.

District of Muskoka – Municipal Modernization

At the District of Muskoka, one of the current and most topical items is that of a Provincial requirement for the District to examine its Council size and representation every other term. Two years ago, the Province started a review process of the appropriate size and composition of all regional Councils (the District of Muskoka is one of 8 across the Province). Rather than impose solutions, the Province realized it was too political of an issue for them to weigh in on and put it back on each of the 8 regional governments.

Over the past 10 months, a sub-committee of District Council has been considering options and recommendations for a path forward. After examining some initial alternatives, on Monday, January 18, 2021, Committee made a recommendation for a potential new representation model which would see a slight reduction in District Council size from 22 to 18 Councillors. Representation on District Council would consist of the Mayor and 2 Councillors from each of the 6 lower tier member Municipalities. The proposal to have an equal number of Councillors from all 6 Municipalities would be the first time in 50 years for a new structure and it promotes equality among all residents within Muskoka. This isn't about seasonal vs. permanent, urban vs. rural - this is about all people, from across Muskoka, having an equal voice when regional decisions are made.

The process for such a change to occur is arduous, in that it needs to meet what is known as a "Triple Majority", after which it can then be approved by the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing. The first step



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in the “Triple Majority” is that a majority of District Council must support this initiative, which is scheduled for a vote mid-February. From there, each of the 6 lower tier municipal Councils (Bracebridge, Gravenhurst, Lake of Bays, Georgian Bay, Huntsville and Muskoka Lakes) must vote to support or reject this new structure. This is the “Second Majority”, meaning that at least 4 of the 6 Councils must support this. The third of the “Triple Majority” comes from a majority of residents across the District of Muskoka also supporting the change. By default, should any 4 of the lower tier Municipalities vote in favour, this itself will constitute a majority of residents, thereby passing the “Triple Majority” test. I would also note that if any one of the Triple Majority votes does not pass, then the Minister, at his discretion, has the ability to implement change, or not, as he sees fit. From my perspective, the changes contemplated is a significant step for everyone in Muskoka and the changes to District Council composition are designed to promote inclusiveness and equality across the District – stay tuned.

Safe Quiet Lakes

The Township of Muskoka Lakes supports the efforts of the community-based organization Safe Quiet Lakes (SQL), which include education to reduce speeds and eliminate wakes close to shore. Excessive wakes and speed continue to be one of the top concerns SQL hears about in surveys and at public events. This past summer they embarked on a pilot project to test tactics to educate and mitigate the effects of wakes and speed on the lakes and rivers. Part of that campaign was consistent signage showing the allowable speed limit of 9 km within 30 metres of a shoreline, a dock or other boat.

Help SQL make Muskoka lakes and rivers safer and quieter to ensure the sustainable enjoyment of a treasured shared resource by following the 10 guidelines in the Boater's Code for respectful boating. Copies of the Boater's Code sign and postcards are available through their website. To learn more about Safe Quiet Lakes follow them on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter @SafeQuietLakes or visit safequiet.ca.

Water Levels

As spring 2021 approaches, water levels are of course on everyone's mind. This is another topic which I have brought passion and resolve and continue to work on. This past November, I had another personal meeting with the Premier, as well as the Ministers of both Natural Resources and Forestry (MNR) and Environment, Conservation and Parks. This meeting was extremely productive and has been followed up with the MNR willing to consider recommendations to mitigate potential flooding. While we are still a long way off from an amendment to the Muskoka River Water Management Plan, the past three months has provided hope and a working dialogue to finally begin the much needed change. Change is on the way.

Bubblers

As winter is now in full swing and we have more people living in Muskoka full time, working from home and avoiding the Covid-19 hotspots, I would be remiss if I once again didn't comment on the negative effect of over bubbling and using red, amber or flashing bubbler lights. If you do have a bubbler to protect your dock, please ensure it is on a timer and is controlled so as not to open the water 10, 20 or 30 plus feet from your dock/boathouse. Five to ten feet of open water is all that is needed to protect your dock. The negative impacts of over bubbling on wildlife, people accessing the ice during the winter and spring breakup where the ice becomes detached from shore too early and is allowed to move around freely can cause greater damage. Again I am encouraging you all to utilize blue lights on your bubbler. Blue is the most penetrating colour in a snow storm and cannot be confused with a snowmobile's tail light, or the inside lights of an open cottage. Flashing and strobe lights are also over kill and simply offensive should someone's waterfront property stare at one of these lights regardless of colour, not to mention they are illegal according to our Dark Sky By-law.

If anyone who is reading this currently has a red, amber or flashing light on their property to mark open water, I am asking that you contact your property maintenance company or on your next visit to Muskoka, that you please change the light to blue to make our lakes as safe as possible this winter.

Final Note

A final note to each of you for your help in social distancing and respecting the Covid-19 virus. With a little luck and increased vigilance on each of our parts to isolate ourselves, let's hope that summer 2021 will provide some semblance of a new normal where we can enjoy all that Muskoka has to offer, even if in smaller groups. Thank you.

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