



Township of Muskoka Lakes

Mayor's Message

June 2021

Dear Residents:

Over a decade ago I started talking about the concept of a Muskoka 365 to promote Muskoka year-round. Who knew that this past winter that idea would become reality. Though we have no way of quantifying exact numbers, it is estimated that our winter population grew by 30% or more the past 6 months, as pandemic related public health restrictions allowed people to see how easy and beneficial it is to work from their Muskoka home.

I want to start this message with a massive thank you to everyone in Muskoka for being #covidsmart, by remaining vigilant and respectful as this pandemic now enters its 16th month. We are all tired, we all miss so many things including close family, but thankfully with vaccines and respectfulness, I believe we have turned the corner and with a little luck as summer 2021 progresses, we will continue to reopen, allowing for the return of many freedoms we so often had taken for granted.

2021 Property Tax Bill

Included in this envelope is your 2021 final tax bill. These bills contain the balance of taxes owing, as well as any taxation adjustments required for 2021.

With the Township Office closed due to Covid-19 public health restrictions, alternative 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.

2021 Services

This year, Council and staff have worked extremely hard to bring a budget that is representative of the current economical climate while continuing to build our reserve funds for future infrastructure projects.

The most common complaint I hear is *"I pay so much and I get nothing for my taxes other than garbage collection"* (which for some island residents is now threatened). Appreciating the financial cost of even property ownership in Muskoka, I would like to highlight where some of our tax dollars go. The majority of the tax revenue goes to the Province for Education 27%, as well as to the District of Muskoka 53%.

As for the Township (the remaining 20%), our Roads account for 32% of our spending. I am not sure if you drive to other areas in the north (or some downtown Toronto streets for that matter) however generally speaking, I believe we have some of the best roads in all of Ontario. Fire represents 15%. This is one of those services provided that you hopefully will never need however should something happen, Muskoka Lakes can help and respond on land, on the water, in the bush and on the ice. Developmental Services (Building, By-law Enforcement and Planning) - 10%.

How important is this department? Across Muskoka Lakes last year over \$139 million was spent on updating or renovating people's homes and cottages. Our Planning Department specifically processed 212 applications for minor variances, new lot creation, zoning amendments, condominium approvals, consent applications and site plans. As of March this year we are on track for 424 in 2021. Hands down, Muskoka Lakes Developmental Services Department is the busiest by far across Muskoka if not all of Ontario Cottage Country. These are just a few of the items where our tax dollars go to support services within the Township.

There is a basic belief that "Muskoka Lakes" pays more for District of Muskoka services than Bracebridge or Huntsville residents. This statement is both true and false. Muskoka Lakes as a whole pays a greater proportion of the District costs because Provincial legislation (Municipal Act) determines your share of taxes through market value assessment and we have the largest number of the most highly assessed properties in Muskoka. Our combined dollar amount is high. However, the statement is also false; for example, if you have a property in Muskoka Lakes valued at \$1 million and you compare your tax bill and specific District costs for Roads, Solid Waste, Planning and OPP or EMS, you will be paying the exact same amount of money to the District as property owners in Bracebridge, Huntsville or Gravenhurst who also have property valued at \$1 million.

I realize this is an over simplified explanation of our tax dollars at work, but it does hopefully help understand some of the services we pay for – even though we don't always see or use them. Regarding our relationship with the District of Muskoka, what this means is that as a Township, we need to continue to improve our relationships with the District and our neighbouring Municipalities ensuring our value for the dollar. We also need to ensure the District continues to look for increased efficiencies and economies of scale to save all of Muskoka costs. To that end, your Muskoka Lakes Council has started a process to better understand and conduct a review of all Township and District Services to continue to improve and to continue to ensure each and every dollar collect for tax is used in the best way possible.

By-law Enforcement

I would be remiss if I didn't also talk about one of the levels of increased service coming out of the 2021 budget. We have heard your concerns that for far too long property owners across Muskoka have gone unchecked and or often they just do things that contravene By-laws, either asking for forgiveness or just paying the fine. We have increased the By-law Enforcement function to three staff members and I am happy to say that the enhanced service level, also includes extended hours of enforcement during the summer months.

In addition to addressing parking, noise and other common complaints, a real focus for the team is finding and ultimately charging (at times with Provincial Offense Charges requiring court appearances) for those that alter the landscape in contravention to our tree cutting and site alteration by-laws, as well as the clearing of property not in accordance to an agreed site plan. Those who



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contravene these By-laws will face significant fines as well as significant delays in completing their projects.

We all need to be respectful of our properties, protecting the natural environment and ensuring a natural vegetative buffer between cottages and the waters edge. Disregard to By-laws in place to protect Muskoka and the environment will no longer be tolerated. Ignorance is not an excuse. If you are not 100% sure – call before you cut or dig!

Township Plans and Strategies

Despite having to adapt and change policies and processes numerous times over the past 16 months due to COVID, your Council has continued to push forward on other strategic and operational programs for the betterment of Muskoka Lakes. Our new Strategic Plan has now been approved and will support Council decision-making and staff activities to ensure that the Township continues to move in the right direction.

We are also in the midst of updating the Township's Official Plan which is the blueprint for how our community will develop and grow over the next 20 plus years. A key piece is new policies to protect the environment and character of our waterfront areas. Council is trying to find the balance of protection and enjoyment as well as respect for the past, without damaging the future. As some of these policies may have an impact on your property development or re-development rights, I encourage everyone to familiarize themselves with some of the contemplated changes within the new plan. To that end we want to hear from you – every voice matters as the impacts of changes to the Official Plan will no doubt effect every property in Muskoka Lakes.

Another significant project Council has on its plate is the Official Plan Amendment regarding re-development of the Resort Village of Minett. For over 30 plus years, Minett has been offered significant development rights and in 2007 the Province granted a developer even greater rights. Thankfully, a new owner of the Cleveland House property (the largest land owner in Minett) has been working with Council to significantly reduce the property rights in an effort to protect the lakes. Yes, you heard that correctly, a property owner is voluntarily giving up their property (development) rights in an effort to protect Muskoka. Stay tuned for more on this later this summer.

In addition to these planning projects, Council is also looking at all things both functional and operational in our Township. We continue work on developing a Community Improvement Plan for the communities of Bala and Port Carling, a Fire Master Plan, and a Parks and Recreation Master Plan. These plans will help identify community priority areas/projects, allowing the Township to direct capital project investments in a more strategic manner.

Final Note

As we move into summer 2021 please remember to be vigilant in continuing to respect social distancing and other provincial reopening guidelines. Also, thank you to all those that have been vaccinated – I realize it is a personal choice, but I know for myself, it is my small way of doing my part in stopping the spread and putting an end to this pandemic.

Thank you for being an integral part of the Muskoka fabric – as you know, myself and all of Council are always available to discuss anything and everything Muskoka – this place we love, this place we call home. I want to leave you all with a final thought – in my 10 years of Muskoka politics I realize that all decisions good or bad have long lasting effects for every taxpayer. Reach out regularly to your Council, and when you have an ask or need something, remember just because things make sense for you, there is always a second side to every story and it is Council's job to weigh all options on behalf of every taxpayer not just those who have asked a question.

Every decision we make will have consequential implications and we all need to understand (and respect) all aspects or perspectives on an issue. I personally live by a motto – I will tell you what you need to hear vs. what you may want to hear.

Council Contact Information

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