



Township of Muskoka Lakes

Mayor's Message

February 2022

Dear Residents:

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

As we enter 2022, just shy of two years since the start of the pandemic and just over three years since the start of this Council term, I have to say never could we have predicted how COVID would change the way we do business, nor could we have predicted how much has been accomplished in just three short years of Council – all while dealing with floods, gypsy moths and of course the seemingly never-ending pandemic.

2022 Property Tax Bill

Included in this envelope (unless you are on a monthly pre-authorized payment plan) is your 2022 interim tax bill. As per the Municipal Act, the amount calculated for this installment is 50% of your 2021 tax levy. In June, we will be sending out the final tax bills that will include any taxation adjustments required for 2022.

For more information on alternatives for paying your taxes, including pre-authorized monthly payments and credit card options, please contact the Tax Department at 705-765-3156. For mailing address changes, you can either call or email propertytax@tomls.ca.

Accomplishments

Remembering summer and fall of 2018 before the last election, there were a number of lofty promises, statements and goals offered by all candidates (myself-included) on how we would change things while sitting on Council. We would bring a better balance to Muskoka, protect the environment, stop residential development disguised as commercial on resort properties, be more financially responsible, implement a revised septic inspection program, enhance by-law enforcement, increase our profile with the Province, work more closely with our neighbouring Municipalities, streamline operations at the Township, stop the potential development of over 4,000 units being built at Cleavelands House/Minett, and many more.

So how have we done?

- ✓ The first draft of a new official plan is out for public input and it includes individual small lake plans and significant measures to protect the environment. And we need your comments.
- ✓ Policies have been crafted that will ensure development on commercial resort properties remains commercial.
- ✓ Mandatory septic system inspections will be in effect this season.
- ✓ Hired additional full-time by-law officers to make sure Municipal by-laws are adhered to.
- ✓ Regular dialogue with various Provincial ministries and several one-on-one dialogues, meetings and visits from the Premier putting Muskoka Lakes front and centre for funding and issues when required.
- ✓ New departmental & reporting structure within

the Township, streamlining many services.

- ✓ New Economic Development Strategy.
- ✓ New Community Improvement Plan to target public streetscape investment in Bala and Port Carling.
- ✓ New Strategic Plan designed to bridge Council terms.
- ✓ New Parks and Recreation Master Plan currently in development.
- ✓ New Asset Management Plan currently in development.
- ✓ Probably one of the most significant accomplishments is the Township adoption of a new Official Plan Amendment (OPA 56) for Minett that now sets a more appropriate vision for the Resort Village. New policies include defining the size of a unit, limiting the maximum number of weeks a condominium unit owner can use their unit, freezing the size of the current docks and protecting them for continued use by cottagers in the area vs. new development usage. And all of these small changes in OPA 56 pale in comparison to the dramatic cut in development rights (granted by the Province in 2007) from over 4,000 units (without size restriction) to less than ½ that amount with size restrictions, and extensive additional policies that will likely result in a further reduction of accommodation units. Not to mention, at the expense of the developers, all of Minett will be connected to a state of the art water and sewage treatment facility to protect the water quality of Lake Rosseau, Bruce Lake and surrounding areas.

In addition to the above accomplishments, for the first time in my 12 years of working on budgets for the Township of Muskoka Lakes, our annual budget has been passed ahead of this interim tax bill. What this means is our staff can get on with executing our deliverables, running their departments, fixing roads and planning for the year ahead with certainty and clarity for all of 2022. I should also point out that included in our 2022 budget are a number of service enhancements to better meet the needs of you the taxpayers. The service enhancements are all directly related to issues we have seen over the past few years and as such, your Council has listened and responded accordingly.

Unprecedented Building Boom

Firstly, as we all know, more people have chosen to call Muskoka home since the start of the pandemic, realizing they can work and play all from their cottage. To this end, many have decided to renovate, build or expand their properties to meet their changing needs. This build/renovate mindset has caused an explosion of applications, inquiries and permits for our building and planning teams to review and process. To put things into perspective, in 2021 our planning department saw over two times the number of applications, all with greater need for discernment and an increased environmental eye to ensure appropriate development on and off the water. This also translated to an increase in our building permits, which amounted to nearly 1,300 for the year. To say we were understaffed in both of these departments would be an understatement and as such, we have "Staffed Up" and added a new planner and additional resources for building staff to help.



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Compounding this building boom, during the summer of 2021 for the first time in my 55 plus year history in Muskoka, we saw the most egregious examples of property owners building without permits or building outside of their registered site plans. Thankfully with our increase in by-law staff resources last year, numerous property owners and contractors were charged, adding significant time delays, expense and court time for each offense. I can also say without hesitation that in all cases, our by-law officers have done all they can legally including pursuing maximum fines to change behaviour. Additionally, at the same time, our planning staff have mandated remediation and enhancements to the affected areas.

Effects of By-Law Infractions

Accountability and transparency are essential to protect Muskoka. Moreover, for each property owner and contractor that was charged, in no circumstance did they "gain anything" by breaking our by-laws and in fact as mentioned, it has only cost them time and money, not to mention in many cases significant public shaming. I can also say that in listening to property owners as well as contractors across Muskoka, everyone is extremely nervous to do anything off-side these days for fear of significant repercussion. However – with the passing of our 2022 budget, Council has yet again put another layer of protection and transparency in place for all concerned to help ensure we protect the character of Muskoka.

There is a general principal that behaviour changes when someone is watching, as such we are making a change to allow all of Muskoka to watch. To that end, we are currently enhancing our online mapping system for any and all property development. The plan is to compile and upload, building permits and planning approvals on every property. This will provide the ability for community members anywhere in the world to see what is going on property by property and should building occur without proper permits, this too will become very evident. This will further impact positive building practices as well as individual behaviour should they consider contravening our by-laws. This GIS mapping, coupled with enhanced by-law enforcement capability is further proof that Council is 100% committed to stopping inappropriate construction practices across Muskoka.

Enhancement Costs

Balance and financial responsibility is something once again every member of Council is committed to and it shows. Included in today's letter is your first installment of your 2022 taxes. Though Council did in fact pass our 2022 budget ahead of this letter, first installment tax bills had already been prepared according to our policy which was an amount equal to ½ of last years taxes. In June, you will receive your second installment notice that will adjust the second bill to included increases to our 2022 budget vs. 2021. So are taxes going up? Yes, however the total levy increase for 2022 is a modest 3.5% over last year and only 1.8% should your property not have changed in value according to MPAC.

I have talked about balance and financial responsibility a lot over the years and it should be noted that this year's increase is also inclusive of the new positions and programs (enhancements) noted above. With this final budget of our term of Council, our 4-year average annual levy increase from 2019 to 2022 equals just 3.7%. Compare this to a general levy increase of 6.7% average per year from 2011 to 2018 and a 4-year prior average from 2015 to 2018 of 8.7% per year. In addition, since the start of this term of Council, we have also significantly increased our reserve balance to help pay for the replacement of our aging assets over the coming years. With our recent enhancements to services and increases in reserves, I believe both balance and financial responsibility have been achieved.

Looking Forward

As a final note, entering now our third year of COVID, it is my hope and prayer that you all are safe and healthy. No doubt we all have been affected by COVID and if you are like me, many will have lost family or a friend to this tragic virus. I realize that vaccines are a personal choice and I respect your individual opinion. I can say however that myself and my entire family have been vaccinated and boosted to do what we can to help stop the spread. And with this pandemic behind us, I look forward to spring and summer 2022, enjoying gatherings of both family and friends. Please be safe and enjoy this magical place we call home – Muskoka.

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