



Muskoka
WATERSHED COUNCIL

Position on Muskoka Vision Project

Muskoka Watershed Council

September 2010

Introduction

The Mission of the Muskoka Watershed Council (MWC) is to Champion Watershed Health. This is accomplished through evaluation, advocacy, communication, and education initiatives undertaken by many MWC volunteers, with the support of our partner organizations such as the Muskoka Heritage Foundation and Heritage Trust, the provincial ministries of Natural Resources and Environment, Fednor and Environment Canada, and the many lake association volunteers across the Muskoka watersheds.

Over the last nine years the Council has been very active in pursuing its mission through the publishing of 3 watershed reports cards, in 2004, 2007 and 2010, on the health of the watershed. This year, the 2010 report card introduced "made in Muskoka watershed health benchmarks" that will allow MWC to track future change in the health of the watershed against the 2010 benchmarked values. Using the best available data for a range of indicators, these report cards have provided district and local council members, the public, and interest groups with valuable input on how well lake association, Local, District, or provincial programs are protecting the health of the watershed.

As part of its mission the MWC has developed a strong stewardship and education program dealing with aspects of watershed health, including

1. Brochures on boat wakes, sustainable forestry, shoreline protection, and protection of wetlands;
2. Position papers on major aspects of public policy impacting on watershed health such as power generation and adaptation to climate change;
3. A speakers series to provide full-time and seasonal residents the opportunity to hear leading researchers and proponents speak on matters related to environmental health; and
4. Most recently, and in conjunction with other community organizations, held a conference on freshwater to coincide with the Muskoka G8 meeting.

In June of this year, the MWC members participated in one of the District's initial visioning workshops, facilitated by District staff. MWC members were free to express their own individual attitudes and values on the questions posed by the staff. With over thirty participants, this session provided District with a wide range of views on the scope and intent of the proposed vision. This paper is being provided to District, as our collective position on the proposed vision that is to be used to guide future growth and development in Muskoka. As the District Municipality of Muskoka considers its vision statement and reviews its Official Plan, the MWC submits these comments for consideration.

Our Vision for the District Vision

Development in Muskoka must occur in a framework that recognizes the fundamental importance and value of maintaining healthy and functioning ecosystems. Healthy and diverse ecosystems clean our water and air; form the basis of our resource, recreational and tourism

economy; and refresh people in our hectic world. In order to achieve sound planning and development, this framework must place value on, and provide tools, to:

1. Maintain sufficient areas of productive forest, wetlands and open spaces,
2. Retain shorelines in a natural state,
3. Protect wetlands,
4. Contain urban sprawl,
5. Reduce our carbon footprint, and ultimately,
6. Sustain the high economic, environmental, and social quality of life in Muskoka.

The 2010 Muskoka Watershed Report Card also identified climate as a significant threat to the long term health of the watersheds of Muskoka. The District of Muskoka Vision and ultimately the District Official Plan policy should recognize this threat, and encourage the development of communities that are sustainable, resilient, and flexible, and give priority to climate adaptation policies and programs to address the uncertainties climate creates for the future of Muskoka.

Economic and Social Base of Muskoka

As Ontario's economy evolves from one based on manufacturing to one that is knowledge-based, Muskoka has the potential to grow existing enterprises and to explore new opportunities that are sustainable both environmentally and economically. In our response to the District's population and employment review titled "the Environment is the Economy" we described the importance and economic value of watershed health in sustaining the local economy. The report went on to identify several ways the District could move towards a more sustainable economy. These are summarized below.

1. Tourism – There will continue to be opportunities to develop events and activities that showcase our natural environment and create jobs, as more people retire and are looking for an active lifestyle. Muskoka Tourism is already developing many new products and strategies with a particular emphasis on sustainable tourism, for example Savour Muskoka, autumn colour and studio tours. The District vision and subsequent Official Plan policy should support the evolving sustainable tourism sector.
2. Forestry – Although the large-scale traditional forestry and logging industry is under pressure with plant and field operations closing or scaling back, the industry itself is looking to refocus its efforts and encourage more sustainable, value-added industries, i.e. fine furniture manufacturing. There are good hard and soft wood forests in Muskoka and many skilled trades' people to support a wide range of small-scale, high value added, wood based manufacturing for both the domestic and export market. Policy that supports small business would encourage this type of growth in the sustainable forestry sector.

Forests are also an integral component of the Muskoka environment and character. The MWC strongly supports sustainable forestry practices and implementation of the District's Forest Health Program comprised of both the education component and an updated and enforceable Tree Cutting By-law. In addition, MWC would support and urge provisions that:

- a. Logging operations are prohibited in wetland areas.
 - b. Property owners are encouraged to prepare silvicultural prescriptions for all logging operations.
 - c. Environmental standards are established for operations with respect to such factors as erosion, operations near significant wildlife habitat, water crossings, excessive rutting, and logging in close proximity to lakes and rivers.
3. Education – Growing the education sector in Muskoka has many benefits. Not only will it allow youth to remain in the community for post-secondary education, it will also encourage adults to seek further education, provide opportunities to address retraining needs across the District, and will increase the numbers of well-paying jobs in the area and bring new skill sets to our communities. The examples of Trent University and Sir Sanford Fleming College demonstrate the benefits to the City of Peterborough and satellite communities. These facilities started very small and developed an expertise in resource-based fields. Both schools are now highly regarded in their fields and bring youth and employment to the communities.
4. Knowledge Sector – Muskoka has the opportunity to benefit from economic sectors that are not necessarily geographically dependent. In particular, the area has much to offer high technology companies and other knowledge-based facilities. Access to the world via high speed internet has changed the way Canadians do business. More and more people are able to communicate with their office or clients in the GTA from their home or second residence in Muskoka, using the internet and video conferencing. Many more would possibly come if there were expanded accessibility. This is technology that was not feasible or available in Muskoka twenty years ago.

Muskoka needs to ensure that it is positioned to benefit from this new connectivity. Improving broad band and cutting edge communications technology will ensure Muskoka is well positioned for future economic growth of this type. Encouraging incubator facilities that allow networking of like-minded companies would support the development of new, smaller companies.

5. Dorset Environmental Science Centre (DESC) – Reflecting the degree to which the economy and environment are linked in Muskoka, the DESC is an environmental, educational, and knowledge-based sector opportunity that few communities in North America have. It is a world renowned research facility that has been of enormous benefit to Muskoka. Encouraging DESC to partner with one of the local universities, to develop a broad range of science and environmental management programs would improve research in and for the local area, sustain and attract good employment, and bring additional new business investment to communities across Muskoka.

Achieving Sustainable Economic, Environment and Social Development in Muskoka

There are a number of issues that should be identified and addressed in the development of the Muskoka vision including:

Private Land Stewardship

Private land stewardship is a critical component in sustaining high quality ecosystem health, maintaining our natural biodiversity, and in developing, sustainable communities. Almost 50% of the land base in Muskoka is privately owned and managed. The current health of local forests is a direct result of the sustainable private land forestry practices that have been practiced in Muskoka for decades. The Muskoka Heritage Foundation (MHF) has recently re-launched a private land stewardship program which further encourages and supports landowners to manage their properties in a sustainable fashion.

The MWC encourages the District of Muskoka to continue to develop programs and policies, like the Lake System Health program and the Forest Health program that foster good private land stewardship. The District can also learn from the experiences of many other local municipalities in jurisdictions where private land resource conservation and stewardship have been successfully developed. Local community, economic and environmental values are not mutually exclusive they are mutually dependant.

Stormwater

Stormwater management is a key factor in developing environmentally sound communities. MWC encourages Muskoka to incorporate Low Impact Development (LID) into future proposals and to remediate old stormwater facilities where possible.

MWC would like to see:

1. municipal approaches to stormwater management that address both quality and quantity for new development and for redevelopment of existing sites including, but not limited to, commercial, industrial, residential subdivision, resorts, golf courses and recreational trails;
2. a public education campaign to highlight the value of wetlands in a stormwater system, and to address the harmfulness of polluted stormwater runoff to our water bodies.

Power Generation and Energy Efficiency

Although the development of green energy is no longer a municipal responsibility, new power generation is inevitable across the landscape of Muskoka. Power plant development will have a significant impact on the future character of the municipality. MWC encourages Muskoka Council to take whatever steps possible to mitigate any adverse impacts.

MWC strongly supports:

1. Mandated, aggressive energy demand management programs. Such a conservation program would result in reduced carbon emissions; lessen the need for expanded power facilities and lead to improved air quality;
2. Adopting the international LEEDs (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) standards for all new development including both urban design and building structures. Development has a significant impact on energy use and can be influenced through municipal approvals. LEED standards are now available for both individual residential structures and community scale designs, and for all types of industrial and commercial development. Municipalities across Ontario are adopting these standards as part of their commitments to sustainable development.

3. Muskoka commenting on new power generation facilities based on the following principles:
 - a. Renewable energy sources are sustainable and therefore more desirable than nonrenewable energy sources.
 - b. Given the nature of the watersheds of Muskoka, small scale power generation projects are both economically and ecologically more viable in Muskoka and are preferred over large scale power generation projects as they require a smaller footprint, and minimize disruption of the natural environment.
 - c. Individual power generation projects, using renewable energy sources such as hydro, solar or wind, are supported as they minimize the requirement for new transmission lines which, in turn, minimizes habitat fragmentation.
 - d. All new projects should limit any impact on shorelines, wetlands, fish habitat and existing large undeveloped areas. For example, hydro projects that use existing dam structures on altered sites are preferable to creating new dams, road and transmission infrastructure to access previously undisturbed areas.
 - e. No new power source should have a negative impact on air quality.

Wetlands

MWC supports the protection and preservation of all wetlands and would encourage the District of Muskoka, in conjunction with the Muskoka Heritage Foundation, provincial and federal agencies, and other non government organizations and the private sector to identify, evaluate and take all possible protective measures to ensure the long-term health of these essential ecosystems.

Bulk Water and the Great Lakes Basin

The watersheds of Muskoka drain into and are a significant part of the larger Great Lakes basin ecosystem. The bulk removal of water from the Great Lakes Basin has a significant potential impact on the water levels of both Georgian Bay and inland lakes along with impacts on coastal wetlands, especially along Georgian Bay. MWC is pleased that the District of Muskoka passed a resolution supporting the enactment of legislation to prevent further diversion or bulk removal of water out of the Great Lakes Basin including the lakes and rivers of Muskoka.

Agriculture

Agriculture and agricultural lands are being lost in Muskoka. Agricultural lands have declined to only 4000 ha, of which only 2000 ha are still farmed. These lands are part of the local heritage in Muskoka, and provide local biodiversity, help refresh and sustain people in a hectic world by providing diverse and attractive landscapes, and perhaps most significantly, provide sustainable, locally grown healthy food. Sustainable food production, locally grown is now recognized as one of the key elements of creating sustainable local communities and many communities across Ontario are taking steps to address this issue through the planning process.

While the Muskoka Watershed Council has not taken a formal position on agriculture, it will undertake research in the coming year to review and develop a position on sustainable and

compatible agriculture. However, as an interim position, the MWC encourages the District of Muskoka, through its review of the District Official Plan, to:

1. address the need to protect agricultural land in planning documents as a vital component of the Muskoka landscape;
2. investigate ways to support sustainable and compatible agriculture and the production of locally grown food as part of creating a sustainable Muskoka; and
3. identify economic and agri-tourism development opportunities that promote expansion of local food production, culinary artisans, and related employment.

Closing Comment

It is the view and position of MWC that the District of Muskoka has an opportunity, through the development of this vision for Muskoka, and subsequent updated official plan, to set in place a framework for achieving sustainable community economic, environmental, and social development. The convergence of very good ecosystem health, high dependence of the local economy on this very good ecosystem health, and the high quality of life enjoyed by residents and visitors to Muskoka, is unique, and is an opportunity rarely found North America. It is an opportunity that must not be missed.