

Planning for Climate Change in Muskoka



What Muskokans Expect Our World to Become

Muskoka residents generally value this wonderful place. Our trees, rocks and water, our crisp clean air, our rural and small town lifestyle, our caring neighbours, our creative arts community, our outdoor recreation, and our 3-minute rush hour all make Muskoka wonderful.

But Muskoka was not always the way it is now – it's been changing ever since people started living here and change will likely continue. What will Muskoka become in the next 40 years? Such a simple question, but it's not answered easily because the future could be any of a wide range of possibilities depending on the forces acting to cause change, and on what we citizens do to influence those changes.

Starting late in 2014, Muskoka Watershed Council set out to learn what our community expected the future to bring. We met in urban and rural communities and in every municipality, with community groups (e.g. Lions, Rotary, Probus) and lake associations involving, in total, over 400 participants in about a 70/30 permanent/seasonal split. While we did not succeed in getting input from school-age residents, we otherwise tapped into a broad diversity of perspectives. After a short presentation to set out our goal, take a look back over the past 40 years, identify typical change drivers, and touch on likely future environmental and demographic/economic changes, we asked four questions about 2050 Muskoka:

What major factors will drive change?
 How will your community be different?
 How will the environment change?
 How will lifestyle change?

And then we listened to you. Discussion flowed freely with little need to encourage; we transcribed

over 200 comments verbatim. You did a great job of separating what you expected from what you might prefer. Expectations centered on three distinct themes – growth and lifestyle, economy, and environment.

Growth and Lifestyle

Most residents surveyed believe official population forecasts (growth of < 1% per year) are too low, although a few believed them to be exaggerated. Most anticipate substantial increases in Muskoka's population as a result of dramatic increases in urban populations in the Greater Golden Horseshoe Area (GGHA). Factors causing that growth will include: advances in technology (access everywhere to true high speed internet); improved transport between Muskoka and the GGHA; desire for a Muskoka lifestyle; climate change impacts moderating our winters; and more people choosing to retire in Muskoka. Many were concerned that growth will degrade environmental quality.

“Municipalities cannot afford to carry on with business as usual; if we do we'll be just like Mississauga! Councils are going to have to make some very gutsy decisions and do things drastically differently to protect what we have, otherwise Barrie is going to be here soon.”

You expect our waterfront lifestyle will continue to evolve as the value (and expense) of owning waterfront property increases. Many of you spoke of a continuing change in values – the “cottage” lifestyle will increasingly be focused on big recreational properties and large, powerful (noisy) boats, and less focused on quiet enjoyment of the lake. Visits by seasonal residents will be shorter, but the cottage rental trend will increase, seasonal homes will be occupied for more of

the year, and larger waterfront homes will result in use of the lakes being more intensive than before. While the natural environment will remain important, it will be a backdrop to a high-octane, fun lifestyle centered on boats, docks, hot tubs and fine restaurants. Growing costs of ownership will make the multigenerational family cottage far less common, and with this our strong connection to the land will weaken.

You also anticipate a growing economic divide between the wealthy, waterfront seasonal residents and the less well-off permanent residents in the towns or rural areas away from water. Servicing the waterfront community will become an even more important sector in our economy than it already is, and the services provided will continue to grow in range and sophistication. Growing intensity of waterfront development will erode access to the water for those residents not living along the shore.

Our Economy

Our permanent population is aging and hollowing out as young people leave the area in search of employment. Many believe this will continue. At the same time, the demand for reliable electricity, fast internet, and other conveniences of the city, primarily by the wealthier waterfront residents, may drive changes that will facilitate new employment opportunities within Muskoka.

“No longer will employment for Muskokans depend on employers based here, but rather on world employers who choose to utilize the skill sets of employees living in Muskoka.”

Many expect that waterfront development and the ever more sophisticated service industry associated with cottaging will remain primary economic drivers. Some recognize that while manufacturing will not recover, an internet-based economy and a growing non-waterfront population could spur green job growth. Several hope that by 2050, improved transpor-

tation links including development of Muskoka Airport and expansion of rail service will help economic development. Others expect Muskoka to experience labour shortages. Many believe retail areas in towns and villages will need to develop niche markets to compete with large chains and an internet-based retail economy.

Our Environment

Most of you expect that unless there is bold political action in the decades ahead, Muskoka's environment will be significantly degraded by the combined effects of growing development, changing lifestyles, and climate change. While you believe that major progress has been made in terms of environmental awareness and best practices, there is a sense that Muskoka is at the threshold of losing its sustainability.

“There’s too much money chasing too little land. Muskoka needs more political action, stronger regulations and stricter enforcement to protect and conserve today’s environmental health in future decades.”

Respondents put most emphasis on the impacts of growing development. For many the struggle will be to keep economic growth aligned with environmental health. These residents believe current regulations are too weak and enforcement is ineffective against the pressure for more development. Changing attitudes and lifestyles, particularly among seasonal residents, are seen to be weakening environmental stewardship, and a large majority of you are convinced that the Muskoka environment at 2050 will be substantially degraded from today. Some noted that climate change will bring more invasive species, challenge forest health, reduce water quality and could lead to a battle for the flow of water in a drier environment. However, you raised climate-induced changes far less often than changes caused by development or change in societal attitudes.

Conclusions

These comments are revealing. While it is well recognized that the great majority of Muskokans value our environment deeply, your expectations reveal a pervasive concern that collectively we are not doing enough to protect that environment into the future. And, while you are aware of climate change and other environmental challenges, your greatest worry is development and changing attitudes to the land.

Muskoka is a world class natural heritage that deserves protection; lose our natural environment and we lose our tax base and our quality of life.

Muskoka Watershed Council thanks all who participated, sharing their expectations with us. Let us work together to ensure we build a future Muskoka that is close to what we value; one that avoids some of the things we fear.