

November 9, 2021

Planning Committee,
Township of Muskoka Lakes
1 Bailey Street
P.O. Box 129
Port Carling, ON POB 1J0

Dear Chair Bridgeman and Planning Committee Members,

**Re: Agenda Item 7a - Site Plan Approval 40/21
Muskoka Worldpeace Consulting Corp, (Port Carling), Roll #: 5-4-010**

The Muskoka Lakes Association (“MLA”), with offices in the commercial core of Port Carling, and Friends of Muskoka (“FOM”) have received correspondence from our members and supporters regarding the proposed plan for this property at the northwest corner of Muskoka Road 118 West and Ferndale Road. This follows on negative comments we received from our members and supporters about the prior building already on the site.

While we realize that the applicant has been working for many years on this project to ensure that zoning by-law and technical requirements are met, the proposed building depicted in the site plan and elevations being considered by Planning Committee at your meeting on November 11th still seems to be problematic for the community. We would encourage the applicant to consider how the project could be altered to respect and build on the community’s character – one that celebrates small-town charm and scale and considers the overall ambiance that makes Muskoka a special and attractive place to live and play in.

We understand that the whole question of “design guidelines” is a tricky and dangerous slope; however, this project provides a clear illustration of why there need to be character guidelines for developments in urban centres in Muskoka. Design guidelines should be about solidifying and enhancing the sense of built community and urban fabric to ensure residents and visitors alike are inspired by a strong sense of place that makes our community unique.

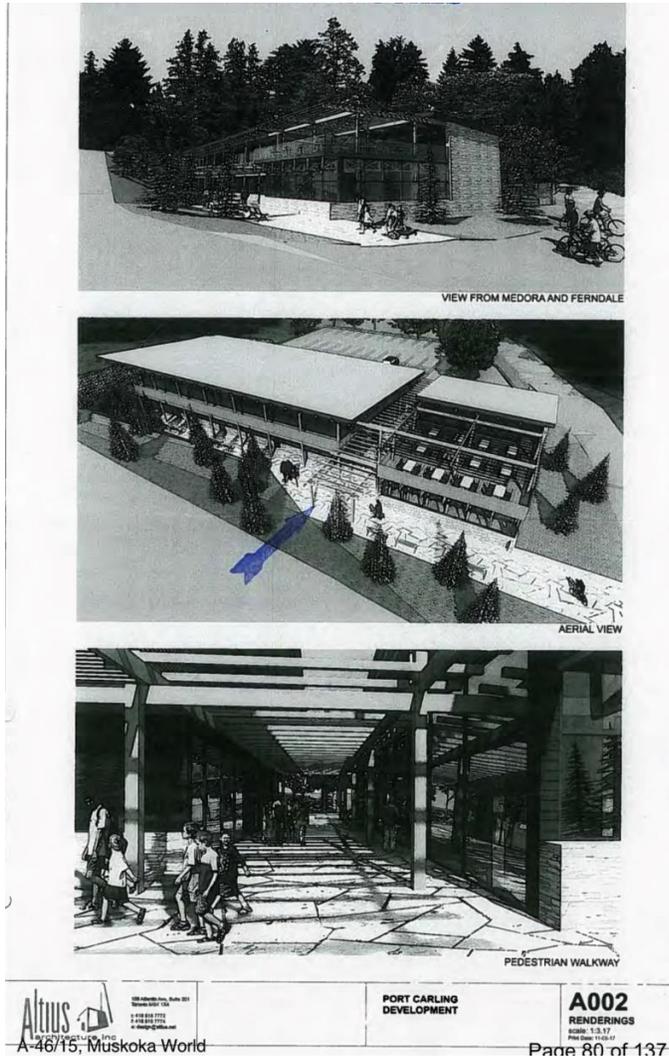
Suggestions for improvement to proposed development

We recognize that there are limited additional objections that can be made from a statutory perspective. In the spirit of mitigating concerns expressed by our members and supporters, the MLA and FOM would like to identify opportunities for enhancements to the proposed project.

1. Street Presence

For good reasons, the current design does not put parking in front of the building to avoid the feel of a “strip mall.” However, by putting parking behind the building, and also not having any pedestrian access from the main street, the building forgoes any sense of presence on the street. Small towns and communities, especially those hoping for a workable retail presence at street level, need to build on the traditional relationship of facing on the main street.

Although the sloping nature of the site makes this somewhat difficult, the project and Port Carling would benefit from a working pedestrian access on the main street to encourage pedestrian interaction with the proposed ground level commercial spaces and enhance the continuation of the streetscape. For example, the following drawings attached to the original application for approval of this building show a pedestrian walkway and interaction to the street:



When considering the Ferndale facing access, we would suggest that sufficient screening be provided given that the owners will be responsible for the storage of solid waste.

2. Streetscape

All good communities are not just about the architecture, but all the other amenities that happen at street level that knits them into the urban fabric. This includes quality street planting, pedestrian lighting, urban amenities such as street furniture, bike racks, public art and useable urban design and sidewalks that appeal directly to pedestrian traffic. Tenant businesses will benefit from increased street presence. The current proposal would benefit from adding these key elements that would tie it into the community or help build a real pedestrian streetscape.

3. Character

There should always be room for new ideas and architectural styles that create strong design statements. The original 2015 plan and design of the two buildings on these lots worked well together as a whole and had a critical mass to create a harmonious new design statement for both. Increasing to a 9,960 square-foot footprint incorporating additional height creates new challenges as compared to the two-storey commercial building with a 7,804 square-foot footprint that was previously approved. The buildings were tied together both physically and through similar design styles that gave the collective development a strong presence. Although the original design still needed work with regards to street presence and streetscape, it provided a strong starting place. Without passing any critique on the current design, the issue is that the two buildings, in such close proximity no longer come together as a whole, and so they miss the opportunity to build a strong sense of place. The result is two very different and incongruous projects that become standalone structures rather than creating community.



original design



current design

4. Sense of Place

There are always opportunities to make special statements when designing a new piece of urban infill. These can be created through secondary architecture and landscape or design elements that help create a special sense of place. The draft Community Improvement Plan (CIP) for Port Carling includes a number of these and refers to them as “Muskoka Moments.” Given the size and mass of this development, it provides a perfect opportunity to feature a “Muskoka Moment” to add a special sense of place and identity for the development and the community as a whole.

5. Materials

The MLA and FOM appreciate the designer’s intent to work with natural stone, however it is difficult to tell the real design direction from these early drawings. We hope that the stone and plant materials would be locally sourced to tie the project back to the community, create good storytelling and a real sense of fit with local culture and heritage. The coloured renderings show white stone, which is not local to Muskoka.

There is also an extensive amount of glazing, and we do have concern that a building this tall, with so much of the façade made of glass, could present a real danger for migrating birds. Is there an opportunity to either reduce the amount of glazing, or adjust the design such that the glazing is not so prominent and perhaps set back from the façade?

Is there a way to use some common materials with the new adjacent building to tie these two together visually to create a stronger sense of place — either in the building envelope itself or through common landscape treatment?

6. Parking

As several councillors mentioned at the September Planning Committee meeting, parking is a serious issue in Port Carling and especially in this location. It is regrettable that there is no opportunity at this point to re-visit the reduction in parking now that use has changed to include eight residential units. Ideally, the applicant would consider reinstating the parking spaces.

7. Consistency with Community Improvement Plan

Many of these issues or similar considerations are outlined in some form in the draft CIP for Port Carling, but unfortunately this plan is not yet in effect. Nonetheless, as the Township is aware of what the community is trying to achieve, and what the general public's vision is for Port Carling, it is unfortunate that this site plan approval is coming forward at this time as it contradicts so many of the goals and objectives of the proposed CIP. This is the only chance to get this right.

The MLA and FOM encourage the applicant to review the draft CIP and explore the ways that this project can add to the goals of the CIP.

In conclusion, while the MLA and FOM recognize that it may be challenging to require the applicant to incorporate any of these suggestions, we are hopeful that the applicant would see the benefit of pursuing them, for the viability of the project, the betterment of Port Carling and as goodwill going forward for future developments within our community.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments.

Sincerely,



Deborah Martin-Downs
President, Muskoka Lakes Association



Laurie Thomson
President, Friends of Muskoka

cc: David Pink, Director of Development Services and Environmental Sustainability
Kaitlyn Walker, Planner I