

Chair Klinck, Mayors Harding, Kelly, Smith and MacDiarmid
Via email

February 19, 2019

Dear Mayors and Chair:

Re: Comments for the Regional Governance Review

The province has embarked on review of regional governance, including the District of Muskoka. It is our understanding that the Mayors and Chair are meeting with the review committee on February 20, 2019. The following comments are made by the Muskoka Lakes Association (MLA), representing over 2500 waterfront families, to contribute to the review with the provincial representatives.

1. **Potential impact on taxation:** Our members for the most part are second home owners, for which we shoulder an ever increasing proportion of the tax burden in Muskoka. Decisions taken by the Province need to consider the potential impact on taxation where so many cottage owners find themselves having to sell, or rent to be able to continue to maintain ownership. Ever increasing property taxes have the potential to put downward pressure on property values, eroding the tax base, and particularly the seasonal tax base, that contributes the vast majority of tax revenue to the District.
2. **Importance of the Local Voice:** The MLA has been a voice of responsible taxation and appropriate development with our local and District governments. The MLA are involved in many planning files holding our local and regional governments to account for development decisions that, without a two tiered system may have resulted in inappropriate development, or many more appeals to tribunals at substantial costs to all taxpayers.

We value the ability to have a local voice where our municipal boundaries are so large and the area is so geographically, demographically and economically diverse (the Township of Muskoka Lakes (TML) is 781 km² with the District of Muskoka at 3900 km², compared with Regions of Peel 1250 km², Durham 2500 km² and Halton 964 km², and Simcoe County at 4800 km²).

3. **Regional Environmental Monitoring and Management:** Perhaps the most important reason to maintain a District government in its current form is the **environment** of Muskoka. *In Muskoka, the environment is the economy.* Unlike municipalities, the environment does not follow boundaries of roads or other straight lines. There are watershed boundaries within which the water flows towards a drainage point (like the Muskoka River). There are forests that form a continuum of habitats allowing animals and seeds to move freely between areas for various life purposes or to escape conditions that may no longer be suitable for survival. To protect and manage the environment, it must be seen for what it is – a system and not a series of discrete

pieces. Municipalities are also part of a system –part of the regional, provincial and federal governments. They benefit from the bigger view.

In recent decades, the Province has pulled back on much of its local involvement, particularly in environmental oversight, protection and management, pushing much of the responsibility down to the municipalities. This trend appears poised to continue. The District of Muskoka through their environmental policies and support for the Muskoka Watershed Council, provide the larger view for the environment in Muskoka – their size alone capturing a significant area of the watershed. Their monitoring programs allow us to see the trends in water quality and the impact of larger policy and infrastructure decisions that have been made over the years. Without the regional interest and resources to be efficient, we would not be able to track and manage the environment in Muskoka. In the other jurisdictions in Ontario, Conservation Authorities (<https://conservationontario.ca/>) have been set up to manage natural resources on a watershed basis. Muskoka does not have a conservation authority to provide that larger oversight.

Recommendations:

1. Maintain the Regional governance of the District of Muskoka to ensure that there is sufficient protection, monitoring and management of the environment.
2. Ensure potential impacts on taxation are considered as part of the review
3. Ensure local representation is maintained to give voice to the local residents
4. Require the formation of a Conservation Authority for Muskoka to provide watershed governance and management in the absence of a District government model.

We trust that these brief comments are helpful and would be happy to elaborate further as this process progresses.

Yours truly,



Deborah Martin-Downs
Chair, Government and Land Use Committee

c.c. Lawton Osler, President MLA
Katie Edwards, General Manager, MLA