

December 11, 2019

Dear Mayor Harding and Councillors,

Re: Council and Standing Committee Structure

Council approved changes to its Standing Committee structure in March 2019, and agreed to review them after six months and consider the public's input. The MLA and FOM are providing our thoughts on the new structure, and hope they help with Council's review.

The MLA and FOM have been monitoring the new Standing Committee structure since it was implemented in July 2019, where the COW was replaced with a Planning Committee and General/Finance Committee. Based on what we have seen, both the MLA and FOM believe that this new structure has serious flaws, and Council should reconsider making the new structure permanent. Our reasons are described below.

1. Councillors who are not on a Standing Committee are being disenfranchised.

The new structure has created a bizarre situation where a Councillor is entitled to attend a Standing Committee meeting they aren't a member of, participate fully in the discussions, but are not entitled to vote.

This disenfranchisement of Councillors has proven to be a problem on both the Planning Committee and General/Finance Committee. Since July 2019, all 10 Council members have attended every Planning Committee meeting (other than when 2 did not attend in November). We applaud Councillors for their interest and commitment to representing their constituents, because planning issues are arguably the most important issues facing Muskoka, and voters have put their trust in all of you to pay close attention to proposed development. However, Councillors Hayes, Mazan, Kelley and Zavitz have been forced to be silent when the vote is taken, and we believe this is wrong.

In the case of the General/Finance Committee, between 2 and 4 of Councillors Bridgeman, Jaglowitz, Roberts and Nishikawa have attended every meeting, and have been denied the ability to vote.

The MLA and FOM believe that the participation of every Councillor who attends committee meetings is equally important, and we expect each of them to be able to represent their constituents – our members/supporters – by casting a vote.

2. Councillors are being denied the ability to sit on a Standing Committee that interests them.

One of the reasons put forward for this new structure was to give Councillors the ability to 'specialize' when they have particular expertise or interest in an area.

Councillors are clearly showing an interest in the activities of committees they're not on. They will be more effective and better serve the public interest if they are permitted to sit on every Standing Committee that interests them.

3. All Councillors should hear the background, public input and discussion on issues before voting.

With the new committee structure, 4 Councillors who are not on a committee are expected to vote on a matter at Council without having heard the relevant information presented to the committee, including the background, presentations from the applicant, comments from neighbours, and the discussions with their fellow Councillors.

A Standing Committee's recommendations to Council are voted on at Council in one bundle. This bundling can lead to mistakes because individual items in the bundle are not given enough attention. We understand this has recently happened with a funding matter that Council did not intend to approve.

Although it's possible for a Councillor who wasn't at a committee meeting to request a particular item be pulled out of the bundle and discussed, the review and discussion will not be sufficient for that Councillor to make an informed vote. We understand this is the reason that so many Councillors are attending Standing Committee meetings that they're not members of. They know how important it is to hear in person in the presentations and participate in the discussion on a matter before being asked to vote.

In a large Council such as at the District, there is benefit to committees that specialize and streamline the review of issues. However, the downside is that the contribution and influence of elected officials who are not on a committee is diminished, contrary to the best interests and desires of their constituents. With the District's large Council, the benefit likely outweighs the cost. However, this Council has only 10 members. There should be a committee structure that allows all of them to hear the background and public input, and participate in the discussion, before voting on an issue.

At the very least, we believe all 10 Council members should be on a standing committee that deals with planning issues.

4. The total time spent in Committee Meetings has become longer with the new committee structure.

One of the goals put forward for the new committee structure was to reduce the amount of time Councillors spend in meetings.

We question whether this is an appropriate goal for Councillors. We understand that Councillors are not permitted to get together in groups larger than four to discuss Council matters outside of formal Council meetings. The result is that Council and committee meetings are the only places where Councillors are permitted to have meaningful discussions together. We agree meetings should be efficient, but we strongly disagree with the singular goal to make them shorter at the risk of curtailing a full inclusive review.

We've looked at the number of hours spent in Standing Committee meetings in the five months since the new structure was implemented compared with the previous five months under the old committee structure. It's interesting to note that the number of hours spent in Standing Committee meetings has increased by over 18 hours. We've excluded special COW meetings to discuss the budget which take extra meeting time in the spring each year. The time spent in Council meetings has declined by over 5 hours. The record clearly shows the new committee structure is not more efficient and it is definitely excluding Councillors and curtailing their ability to fulfill their responsibilities to their constituents.

5. Increasing the number of consecutive days of meetings from 2 to 3 is onerous and costly.

We are concerned that it is more onerous for Council members and staff for monthly meetings to run for three rather than two consecutive days. It's also an extra cost for taxpayers to have staff organize and attend three days of meetings rather than two.

There is an extra cost for taxpayers when special COW meetings are required to be convened, such as the October 28th COW meeting to discuss Minett. This would have been unnecessary if all Councillors were members of Planning Committee.

From the public's perspective, we would prefer to have two consecutive days of longer or concurrent meetings. For example, one day to deal with planning issues, and a second day to deal with general/finance issues and Council. Based on our records of the number of hours being spent in committee and Council meetings, this would be a reasonable meeting schedule since planning issues are taking approximately 4 to 6 hours, general/finance issues are taking approximately 1 to 3 hours, and Council meetings are running approximately 2 to 4 hours.

6. The public should not have to make requests to delegate until after the Agenda is released.

This Council meeting is a prime example of the problem with the public having to request to delegate before the Agenda is released. I requested to delegate on Council's committee structure based on a lucky guess that it would be on the Agenda, and now have 5 minutes to speak. However, anyone else who wants to delegate on a matter they did not guess will be on the Agenda will only be given two minutes, which is far too short to be effective.

We strongly urge Council to amend its procedures to permit the public to request to delegate at least 2 business days after the Agenda is released.

We hope these comments will be helpful.

Sincerely,

Muskoka Lakes Association
PRESIDENT



Lawton Osler



Friends of Muskoka
DIRECTOR



Susan Eplett

