

MRA Submission to Public Meeting re Port Carling Boundary Expansion

My name is Peter Long and I am the President of the Muskoka Ratepayers Association. My personal background is not as a planner, but as a long time seasonal resident of Muskoka (dating back to the 40's), and as an engineer who tries to look at problems in a logical manner.

In the last year, there has been a lot said about Official Plan Amendments, the Eastern Boundary Expansion, and specific development proposals such as Hannah's Landing and the motel. There have been many arguments for and against each of these subjects – some arguments based on planning considerations, some on emotion, some on the way things are or used to be, some on the development rights of the owner, some on affordability, some on social concerns, some on the need to expand, some on business case, and even some NIMBL (not on my beloved lake).

The one question that continues to bother me is the one that asks “is development driving planning, or is planning driving development”? In other words, who is in charge?

As individuals, before we purchase a vacant lot in Muskoka, we look to see if we can build a cottage on it. Given that development right, we are entitled to do so regardless of what the neighbours might like. We can even ask for some bending of the rules, and if reasonable, these can be granted. These rights come with the property and we can exercise them.

On the other hand, if the Township perceives a need for some change, it can evaluate the need and costs, and then put the rules in place to facilitate this through an Official Plan.

In the case of the eastern boundary expansion, these issues have become very cloudy, with questions of the need and the width of a road all thrown into the mix in the same breath,

What I would like to suggest is that the questions relating to boundary expansion be broken down into a number of more manageable pieces, and that they be addressed in a logical fashion. I would therefore suggest that we might approach the problem by looking at the following:

1. The need to expand
2. The will to do so
3. The allowability
4. The affordability
5. The nature of any development

Note that a negative answer at any step likely stops the process. Looking in a bit more detail at each of these steps -

1. Decide if an expansion of Port Carling is necessary.
 - What do the growth studies tell us,
 - Do we have confidence in these studies over the planning period,
 - What is the timing / phasing of this growth,
 - Is there suitable land available within the current boundaries of Port Carling, or do we have to expand
 - Where is the 'best' place to expand

A need to expand moves us to the next step; no need stops the process.

2. Decide whether there is the 'will' to carry out the expansion
 - What is the stated 'vision' of the Council – does it support growth of some sort or does it want to maintain the status quo
 - How do the residents of Port Carling see the future of their town
 - What does the business community and the Chamber of Commerce think
 - How does the District view the plan

This is really a matter for the politicians and stakeholders to decide. Any expansion or change will take leadership, and if this is lacking, then the process stops here.

3. Decide whether the expansion is 'allowed'
 - Does it fit within the regulations of all levels of government
 - Is there support at these levels

If we get this far, having established the need and the will to proceed, this step looks at the existing rules and practices, and examines alternatives. Do things need to be done as they always have been, has technology provided some new answers, etc.

4. Decide how it can be afforded
 - What services must be provided for any development
 - Are there legitimate alternatives in the provision of these services
 - What would they cost
 - How can they be paid for (tax payer, development charges, developer pays, new federal infrastructure spending, etc)

This is a very real problem. The District is already running a significant debt. Costs should not be hidden or deferred, as this only leads to a lower selling price to the purchaser, but a higher operating cost down the road.

5. What should be the nature of the development (given the need, the will, and some idea of costs)
 - How big should the development be, should it be phased in
 - What is the nature of that development
 - Are there private / public areas
 - Does it fit the 'character' that is desirable
 - Does it benefit the community
 - Does it make economic sense to the Township (and the developer)
 - What are the alternatives

In other words, the development should now be subject to the normal planning and regulation process. This is the time to subject the proposed development to full scrutiny, having established the need, the will, the allowability and the affordability.

In summary, we have to discern the fundamental questions to be asked and decided upon at each step, and not let other issues cloud or confuse these decisions. Thank you.