

The Honourable Steve Clark
Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing
17th floor - 777 Bay St
Toronto, ON M5G 2E2

Re: District of Muskoka Municipal Modernization Review

Dear Minister Clark,

We are writing to you on behalf of the Muskoka Lakes Association (MLA) and Friends of Muskoka (FOM). The MLA is one of Canada's oldest and largest cottager associations and FOM is Muskoka's largest cottager advocacy group. Together, we share a common goal of protecting and preserving Muskoka's unique natural character and environment for future generations. Below you will find our views on the Municipal Modernization review currently taking place in the District of Muskoka. This information and our views on the matter have previously been shared with District Chair John Klinck and the 22 District Councillors.

Background

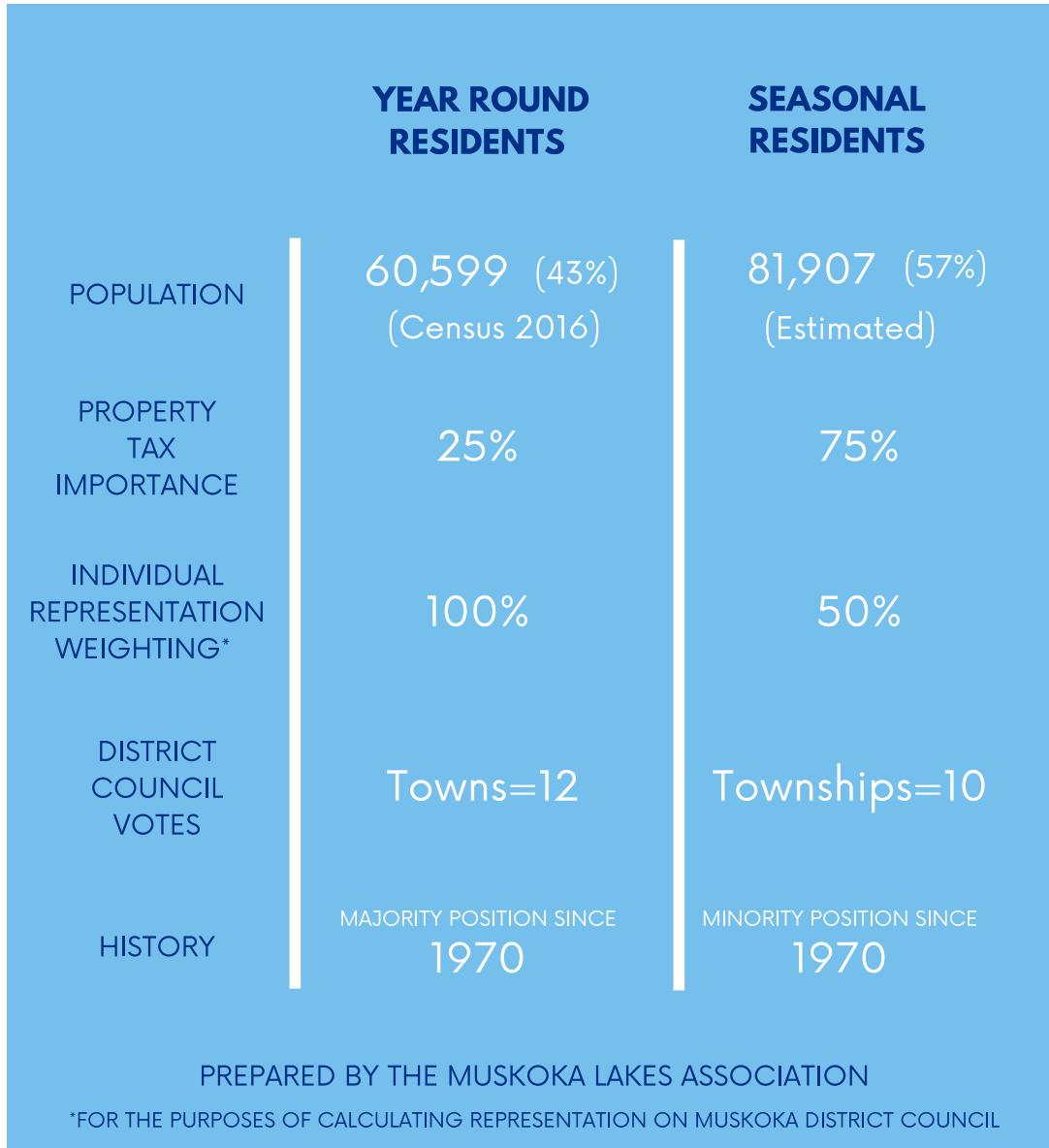
It is our view that the fundamental electoral and resulting governance model of the District of Muskoka is broken as the chart below illustrates. We believe the current antiquated model is inconsistent with modern representation by population democratic principles.

Since the inception of the District of Muskoka in 1970, seasonal residents have been population weighted at 50% relative to year-round residents at 100% for the purpose of upper tier District Council seat allocation. Because of this long-outdated practice, the three lower tier Townships (Muskoka Lakes, Georgian Bay and Lake of Bays), where seasonal residents comprise an estimated 82% of the townships' population, were allocated fewer seats on District Council than the three lower tier Towns (Bracebridge, Huntsville and Gravenhurst), where seasonal residents are estimated to only comprise 35% of the town's population.

We believe this has created a situation where the voices of the seasonal residents are not fairly heard. In particular, the data shows that seasonal residents comprise 57% of the District population and contribute some 75% of property tax revenues.

What we are asking for is a District Council structure which more fairly allocates council seats between the three Townships, with their primarily seasonal populations, and the three Towns, with their primarily permanent residents. This will more accurately reflect the overall population distribution as it is currently understood.

District of Muskoka



The Need for Modernization

While the founding representation model may have been acceptable 50 years ago, much has changed in Muskoka to make it inappropriate and it is our view the model is in drastic need of updating to current democratic representation standards. A few of the societal changes and our supporting rationale are listed below:

1. The original rationale in the late 1960s for weighting the seasonal population at 50% was that seasonal residents were only in Muskoka for a portion of the year. This is no longer the case, since seasonal residents now spend extended periods of time in Muskoka and have become actively involved in the community through both volunteer and elected roles. This was noted in the Final Report on the District of Muskoka Council Composition Review dated October 16, 2017 (the “2017 Review”) which stated “there can be little doubt that some seasonal residents are as deeply invested in their cottage community as they are in their home neighbourhood.”
2. The consultants who conducted the 2017 Review interviewed members of District Council, held a public meeting, and considered the public’s verbal and written submissions. They concluded, “We believe, as do virtually all participants in this review, that seasonal residents should be weighted at 100 percent for the purposes of determining representation on District Council.” This was recently reaffirmed by council who adopted the recommendation of the modernization committee that seasonal residents be counted at 100%
3. Virtually all municipalities across Canada treat residents fairly and equally for the purpose of elected official representation. The current District model in our view is antiquated and out of touch with standard practices. The heart of all true democratic institutions is one person one vote. The District is lagging terribly on this fundamental underpinning of democracy, which was also noted in the consultant’s report. As a high-profile outlier, we think the Province should be keen to correct this shortcoming.
4. Seasonal residents make a significant financial contribution to the District in the form of property taxes and significant year-round support of the local economy. But to be clear, we are not advocating for representation based on financial contribution -- we are simply looking for fair and equal representation of seasonal residents relative to year-round residents.
5. Year-round residents are fully counted via census data while seasonal residents are “guesstimated” by the District based on available data. We believe it is time to develop a proper long-term mechanism to accurately count seasonal residents with the same statistical rigour as census data. As shown above, some 82,000 residents are estimated to be seasonal and 61,000 residents are census validated year-round residents.
6. Just as person’s citizenship is irrelevant when determining whether they are a year-round resident, we believe that a person’s citizenship should be irrelevant in determining whether they are a seasonal resident. While non-Canadian citizens who own property in Muskoka are not allowed to vote, we believe as taxpayers, they must be counted for representation purposes on any District Council that will determine how their tax dollars are spent.

Our Request of the Minister's Office

We would please ask that your office conduct a thorough review of any proposed changes to the District of Muskoka's Council size or composition that are proposed by the District of Muskoka to ensure that they include the following critical components:

1. That seasonal residents be weighted at 100% for the purpose of District Council representation creating a fair and equal representation model across both seasonal and year-round constituent groups. Of note, District Council has recently indicated support for the 100% weighting, but we thought it prudent to bring the issue to your attention, nevertheless, given it has been an issue of long-standing concern.
2. That an on-going and appropriate seasonal resident counting mechanism be mandated to ensure there is a complete and accurate count for use in both general government operations as well as electoral representation. This count should include all taxpayers regardless of voter eligibility, nationality or time spent in Muskoka.
3. That once 2 above and a representation by population review is completed that the public will have the opportunity to review the data on which District Council seat allocations are being proposed.
4. That all of the above work be completed in time for the next election of District Council in 2022.

We thank you in advance for your consideration of our request. Should you need more information please feel free to contact us. We would not have written if we did not believe this matter warranted your attention given the fundamental democratic principles involved.

Yours sincerely,



Deborah Martin-Downs
President, Muskoka Lakes Association



Laurie Thomson
President, Friends of Muskoka

CC Premier Doug Ford

Kate Manson-Smith, Deputy Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing

Norm Miller, MPP

John Klinck, Chair of District of Muskoka

Graydon Smith, Mayor, Town of Bracebridge

Phil Harding, Mayor, Township of Muskoka Lakes

Paul Kelly, Mayor, Town of Gravenhurst

Karin Terziano, Mayor, Huntsville

Peter Koetsier, Mayor, Georgian Bay

Terry Glover, Mayor, Lake of Bays