

March 10, 2020

Dear Mayor Harding and Councillors,

Re: Draft Strategic Plan Framework dated February 2020

The Muskoka Lakes Association (MLA) and Friends of Muskoka (FOM) applaud Council for its initiative in engaging in strategic planning to establish the goals and priorities that will direct the activities of staff and Council over its term of office. However, we are concerned with a number of aspects of the Draft Strategic Plan Framework (SPF) prepared by StrategyCorp that Council will be considering. Some of these concerns were mentioned by Susan Eplett in her delegation on our behalf on February 12, 2020. Since StrategyCorp's SPF is on the Agenda for Council's March 11th meeting, we are setting out our comments in writing in the event that they are helpful.

When the Township initiated its Official Plan review last year, the community was consulted and gave extensive input on a number of the same items that are in the SPF, including an appropriate vision for the Township, as well as the Township's strengths, weaknesses, challenges and opportunities. The process was kicked off at the July 19, 2019 Community Visioning Session, which was followed up through a three week online survey (July 22 - August 9, 2019), and finally at the public meeting held on August 16, 2019. The community's views are summarized in the Community Visioning Summary prepared by LURA Consulting dated August 2019.

All members of our diverse community have been able to give input into the Township's vision, strengths, weaknesses, challenges and opportunities, including permanent and seasonal residents, since this consultation was done during the summer with ample advance notice.

When such great effort was made this past summer and fall to include all stakeholders in updating these items, it seems a waste of the Township's time and resources to duplicate this work. It also will be confusing for the community to be asked again to attend a consultation meeting, complete a survey, and define another vision statement for a separate yet linked purpose.

It may be suggested that the Township can have two vision statements: one for strategic planning purposes, and one for the Official Plan. We disagree. Any organization would only have one overriding Vision Statement that guides all of its decisions and activities, including strategy and planning. A Vision Statement is the anchor point of any strategic plan. It outlines what an organization would like to ultimately achieve and gives purpose to the existence of the organization.

We note that the Township's website explains that the Official Plan review process is about the community discussing our view of the future of the Township, not just land planning. It states: "The Official Plan is the Township's overarching policy document that is intended to provide for the vision of the future of the Township of Muskoka Lakes... The intent is for the Official Plan Review

to be a community discussion about the future of the Township of Muskoka Lakes, rather than being exclusively a land use planning exercise.”

As a result, the vision statement developed during the Official Plan Review should be the Township’s only vision statement, and it should guide all decisions - include strategic and planning.

We believe the following Vision Statement proposed in the Strategic Plan Framework (SPF) is inconsistent with the community’s vision:

“The Township of Muskoka Lakes will maintain its iconic nature by balancing environmental stewardship and economic growth”

The community spoke loudly and clearly during last summer’s community visioning: **growth should not be put before the environment** -- the Township should adopt an Environment First principle, because the environment is our economy. These are principles supported by the MLA, FOM and our respective members and supporters. Having this strong and unambiguous principle in the Township will hopefully help to avoid the land development issues we are currently experiencing.

The vision statement proposed in the SPF provides for balancing economic growth and environmental protection. This implies a trade off between the environment and economic prosperity. However, the environment is the cornerstone of Muskoka’s economic success. They go hand in hand. Growth at the expense of the natural environment and character of Muskoka may result in short term gain, but it will be at the expense of a long term, sustainable and healthy economy.

A requirement to balance economic growth and environmental protection will make it all too easy to make decisions in favour of short-term economic benefit despite the damage inflicted on the natural environment, such as a quarry near a body of water or another project such as Bala Falls. Growth can and should be considered through an environmental lens.

Prioritizing the environment does not mean lack of economic growth and development: it means responsible, sustainable economic growth and development.

We understand that LURA consultants have proposed to the Planning Committee these alternative vision statements, that it drafted based on the community’s input:

- 1. The Township of Muskoka Lakes is recognized for its picturesque heritage landscape with a vibrant mix of lakes, rivers, forests and towns. The Official plan will take a leadership role to protect Muskoka’s character and environment for climate resilience, while supporting a thriving year round economy for sustainable growth.*
- 2. The Township of Muskoka Lakes is a leader in environmental stewardship, sustainable urban towns and balanced tourism fostering quality of life for all.*

The MLA has also proposed the following vision statement to Council that is supported by the MLA Board and FOM since it creates a direct link between environmental protection and the success of our economy:

"The unique character of Muskoka Lakes' natural and cultural environment is understood, valued, protected and enhanced. It is at the core of a sustainable and thriving community and will be passed on to future generations."

Finally, StrategyCorp has suggested a timeframe for consulting the community that is far too short and in the wrong season to receive the broad and reliable feedback from the community that we were able to achieve last summer. It has also proposed a list of secondary stakeholders who will be consulted, which excludes FOM - we understand this was an oversight, and hope FOM will be included.

The SPF states that the Township's new strategic plan "will include robust and extensive engagement with staff, stakeholders, and the community to ensure buy-in and successful implementation". However, the proposed timeline allocates only two weeks in the middle of the winter for community feedback.

By comparison, the community was consulted over two months last summer, with ample advance notice, on a number of the same items that are in the draft SPF -- the Township's vision, strengths, weaknesses and challenges/opportunities.

We believe the Township should build on what has already been accomplished with the LURA consultants and use the coming summer months to consult the community on its strategic plan. There is no need to rush the community consultation as StrategyCorp has proposed, and allowing for this to occur over the summer of 2020 will result in a superior product to guide the Township.

We hope these comments will be helpful.

Sincerely,

Muskoka Lakes Association



Lawton Osler
President

Friends of Muskoka



Donald Lang
Chair

cc. David Pink, Director of Planning