

Welcome to the February 2017 issue of MLA NewsBites –



**Ice Safety** – The MLA would like to remind everyone to exercise caution around lakes and rivers and check the conditions of any ice before venturing onto it. Although ice may appear thick, you cannot rely on appearance alone at this time of year. Keep informed of local conditions through local radio stations. The OPP routinely issue safety advisories in winter. Remember to always use common sense, respect posted signage and check the weather forecasts.

**Budget Time in Muskoka** - February and March are traditional budget months for the District of Muskoka and local municipalities. The MLA has been attending various councils' budget meetings. **Read the information below as several municipalities have now adopted their 2017 budgets.** With crumbling infrastructure and fewer provincial grants, prepare to see some big increases in some municipalities' tax bills. If you are concerned, or have questions as to the rationale for the approved budgets, contact your local councillor.

You can find contact information for Muskoka councillors [here](#).

**Status of 2017 Budgets:**

**District of Muskoka – Budget Adopted – 1.7% net levy increase**

**Town of Bracebridge – Budget Adopted – 6.2% net levy increase**

**Township of Muskoka Lakes – Budget Adopted – 7.96% net levy increase**

**Town of Gravenhurst – Proposed Budget – 7.1% net levy increase**

**Seguin Township – Proposed Budget – 1% net levy increase**

**Electronic Voting for 2018 Elections** - A number of municipal governments are looking to have phone and internet voting to replace mail-in ballots for the 2018 elections. Huntsville and Seguin Township have provided this option in the past. Now Bracebridge, Gravenhurst and the Township of Muskoka Lakes plan to make this option available to voters for 2018. A simple phone call to the municipal clerk will help guide and inform you how to use this new voting option.

**DISTRICT OF Muskoka**

**District 2017 Draft Tax Supported Budget** - On February 1<sup>st</sup>, the MLA attended 2017 budget deliberations at the District. The 2017 Draft Tax Supported Budget was presented, proposing a net levy increase of 1.95% over 2016; this was half of the previously proposed 3.9%. After committee spent several hours reviewing the budget, **the net levy increase was reduced to 1.78%. Taking into consideration an estimated assessment growth of 0.83%, the 2017 tax increase is 0.94% which results in a \$5.40 annual increase in taxes for a typical residential property assessed at \$200,000.** Included in this year's budget is funding for the purchase of equipment to enable webcasting of Committee and Council meeting. The 2017 draft budget was presented to District Council for final approval, and adoption on February 21<sup>st</sup>. The District's draft budgets can be found [here](#). **The MLA congratulates the District on working hard to hold the net levy increase to only 1.78%. The MLA also supports webcasting of Committee and Council meetings as a way of informing their residents who are not always able to attend meetings in Muskoka.**

**Update on District's new Official Plan** – On January 18<sup>th</sup>, the District held an Open House to discuss the draft Preliminary Directions which are intended to shape the updated policies for the Muskoka Official Plan. A variety of interested stakeholders attended and provided comments. Issues discussed were: What growth could be expected, how resort development could be supported, where secondary dwelling units could be located, and consideration of support for the sharing economy. The District expects to have the new Official Plan policies

available by the summer. Information on the new Official Plan can be found [here](#). ***The MLA attended and spoke about our concerns with allowing secondary dwellings on the waterfront, and questioned the definition of ‘appropriate’ development. We also stressed that any new resort development should be compatible with the character, density and scale of existing neighbouring properties; stressed the economic contribution of seasonal residents; and agreed that Muskoka’s ‘small-town’, waterfront and rural character must be maintained. The MLA’s letter submitted to the District can be found [here](#). The MLA will continue to attend future OP meetings and consult with District staff and politicians. The MLA invites your questions and feedback on this issue.***

**District’s Resort Industry Stakeholders’ Working Session** – On February 6<sup>th</sup>, District staff, along with their consultant, invited Muskoka resort industry owners, managers and other interested parties to discuss the draft resort and tourism policies for the new Official Plan. The resort industry is struggling. In 1957 Muskoka had 554 resorts; by 2011 there were just 87. Discussion topics included: commercial components of resorts, the issue of cottage rentals and Airbnb, how resorts can become more sustainable, and how resort property owners can exit the industry successfully. Resort owners requested more flexibility so that resorts could be operated as 100% residential use with no commercial component. The consultant’s presentation can be found [here](#). ***Several MLA members attended this important meeting. We remain concerned about District’s ability to enforce resort policies and the possibility of allowing “maximum flexibility” in regard to the number of residential units.***

## **TOWN OF BRACEBRIDGE**

**Municipal Budget and Business Plan Adoption** – On February 22<sup>nd</sup>, Bracebridge Council voted to adopt the Town’s 2017 Municipal Budget and Business Plan. The full budget breakdown can be found [here](#). ***The result is a 6.2% net levy increase which equates to a 5.3% increase to the general tax rate, which equals an increase of \$22.00 per \$100,000 of residential assessment.***

**Bracebridge receives an Award of Excellence from Economic Development Council of Ontario (EDCO)** – On February 9<sup>th</sup> Bracebridge received an Award of Excellence for its Community Improvement Plan (CIP) at EDCO’s annual conference in Toronto. The award recognizes strategic plans and initiatives for communities with a population between 10,000 and 50,000. In 2016, Bracebridge CIP approved 42 applications for grants totaling \$139,000. To read Mayor Graydon Smith’s comments, see the news story [here](#). ***The MLA congratulates Bracebridge on its award and successful revitalization of its downtown core.***

**Mayor Graydon Smith on Fiscal Sustainability re Infrastructure** – Mayor Smith recently addressed the growing problem of crumbling infrastructure and the province’s downloading of this responsibility to the local municipal governments. “The infrastructure gap is measured in the billions of dollars for municipalities in Ontario alone. In Muskoka, it’s certainly in the millions, if not tens of millions. Property tax is the only tool municipalities have to lean on for these dollars, which is becoming problematic.” The full news story can be found [here](#). ***The MLA applauds Mayor Smith’s efforts.***

**Recreation, Parks and Trails Master Plan** – Bracebridge is in the process of developing a Recreation, Parks and Trails Master Plan. This is a comprehensive, multi-year framework that provides a vision and guiding principles for the future of the Town’s recreation, parks and trails systems and services. Anticipated completion date is fall of 2017. The Town invites you to provide input into the plan through a survey found [here](#). The survey will remain on-line until March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2017. ***The MLA encourages Bracebridge-area residents to take 10 minutes to complete this survey.***

## **TOWN OF GRAVENHURST**

**2017 Budget** – The recommended 2017 Budget was presented to Gravenhurst Town Council on February 15<sup>th</sup>. According to the Town’s press release – The Town of Gravenhurst net budget is proposed to increase by 7.1% over 2016. This increase consists of three components:

- 3% increase to the tax levy contribution towards capital projects;
- 2% for repayment of funds borrowed for 2016 capital projects; and
- 2.1% for Town operations

The full press release can be found [here](#).

**Gravenhurst 2017 Budget Schedule** – The following is the list of dates where Town Council will discuss and deliberate the 2017 Operating Budget. Note that Saturday, March 4<sup>th</sup> is the date scheduled for public input. **All public meetings will be held in Gravenhurst’s Council Chambers at 3-5 Pineridge Gate. Everyone is welcome to attend.**

**Monday, February 27, 2017 – 2pm** - Council Review of Operating Budget

**Wednesday, March 1, 2017 – 2pm** - Special Council Meeting 2017 Budget

**Thursday, March 2, 2017 -2pm** - Special Council Meeting 2017 Budget

**Saturday, March 4, 2017 - 9am-11am** - 2017 Budget (Public Comments/Feedback)

**Tuesday, March 7, 2017 – 2pm** - Approval of 2017 Operating Budget

***The MLA will be attending most of these meetings and will report back in future issues of NewsBites. If you have any concerns with the budget or the proposed levy increase, don’t hesitate to contact your local councillors. Or better yet, attend in person to comment.***

**Muskoka Regional Centre Open House**-The redevelopment of the former Muskoka Regional Centre property, a 70-acre jewel with 2,000 metres of prime Lake Muskoka waterfront, is an important issue for all of Muskoka. On Tuesday, February 28<sup>th</sup>, from noon until 1:30 p.m., the Town of Gravenhurst is hosting a meeting on the proposed redevelopment. Recent media reports stated the property will be developed as a boarding school, with a portion becoming a public park. Maple Leaf Schools and Knightstone Capital are co-hosting the meeting at the Gravenhurst Opera House. The public will have the opportunity to review the plans, learn about Maple Leaf Schools, ask questions and provide input. At 2 p.m. a special council meeting will be held at the municipal office to hear from the proponents. ***The MLA will be attending these meetings. We encourage you to come out, listen and ask questions. More on this in future NewsBites.***

## **SEGUIN TOWNSHIP**

**Councillor Jack Hepworth’s February 6<sup>th</sup> Council Report** –In this report Councillor Hepworth gives the highlights of Seguin’s 2017 Operating and Capital Budgets, details of the 2016 Water Quality Monitoring Program, Upgrades to the Rosseau Memorial Hall to make the building more accessible and user-friendly and Seguin’s new Parks & Trails Master Plan. Councillor Hepworth’s full report can be found [here](#). ***Once again, the MLA congratulates Seguin Township Council on producing a budget for 2017 that results in only a 1.0% tax rate increase. Well done!***

## **TOWNSHIP OF MUSKOKA LAKES (TML)**

***Special Note – Effective last month, Ward A Councillor Donelda Kruckel has officially changed her last name to Hayes.***

**TML Council Adopts 2017 Budget on February 17<sup>th</sup>** – On January 17<sup>th</sup> TML introduced its 2017 draft budget proposing a net levy increase of 9.84%. A big part of this increase came from a staff recommendation for a new capital levy of 5% to be added to the budget every year for the next 10 years, to boost much-needed capital reserves. Other hot issues included a proposal to “repurpose” the Bala arena, potential closure of two community centres and a \$2.5 million investment by the Fire Department.

Subsequent meetings included angry reactions from taxpayers demanding lower spending, and emotional debates among councillors as well. On February 2<sup>nd</sup> council voted unanimously to not make any changes to the Bala arena this year. A public meeting was promised for the summer to hear more feedback regarding potential new uses for the Bala arena and potential closure of community centres.

Councillors Harding, Currie, Nishikawa, Ledger and Hayes pushed hard for further reductions in the budget. The main debate focused on the \$2.5 million budgeted for a new fire station in Minett. Councillor Harding stated ***“I’m gravely concerned about an unsustainable fire department. \$2.5 million out of reserves over the next 5 years for Minett means that on average the fire department costs compose nearly 25% of our levy! We have to get our spending under control.”*** Near the end of the day, councillors voted to reduce the capital budget for the new Minett fire station to \$1.5 million. Other cost-cutting measures included selling the Duke House Visitor Centre in Port Carling and removing funding for council chamber webcasting equipment. Staff was directed to continue looking for further cost savings. The latest version of the Budget can be found [here](#). ***On February 17<sup>th</sup> Council adopted the 2017 budget. The final net levy increase was reduced to 7.96% which equates to a 6.21% increase to the general tax rate, which equals an increase of \$6.62 on a residential property assessed at \$100,000.***

***The MLA delegated at the Public Meeting on January 26<sup>th</sup>, expressing our concern over the large increase. Our letter stated: “We are very concerned about township spending which is perceived as currently being not prudent and out of control.” We also noted that “The waterfront cottage owners of the Muskoka Lakes Township shoulder the majority of the tax burden, and utilize local services the least.” The MLA also supported the continued funding of community centres and the retention of ice in the Bala arena. Our letter can be found [here](#). The MLA would be pleased to hear your comments.***

## **BALA FALLS UPDATE**

**Rob Stewart - ‘Fight for Bala’ film producer** - Canadian filmmaker, photographer and Bala resident Rob Stewart died February 3<sup>rd</sup>. His body was recovered off the Florida Keys after Stewart, 37, had gone missing after deep sea scuba diving. Rob is remembered by many in Muskoka who knew him from his summers spent in Bala and by his short film ‘The Fight for Bala’, about the environmental and safety impacts on Bala of the proposed hydroelectric plant. A personal remembrance of Stewart has been posted on the Save Bala Falls website [here](#). ***Read the touching tribute to Rob [here](#) from the young man, Jonah Bryson, who co-directed ‘The Fight for Bala’. The MLA was saddened to hear of the loss of such a talented and dedicated environmentalist. His determination to expose the truth, no matter how ugly, is to be commended. Rest in peace, Rob.***