February 4, 2013

Township of Muskoka Lakes
Box 129. 1 Bailey Street,
Port Carling Ontario P0B 1J0
Attn: Township Council

Dear Madam Mayor and Members of Council:

Re: Budget for 2013

The Muskoka Lakes Association (MLA) represents more than 2300 families within Muskoka, all of whom pay taxes to a local municipality and to the District of Muskoka. More than 70 per cent of our members own property in the Township of Muskoka Lakes. Our members consistently tell us that taxation is one of their most important issues.

The MLA has reviewed the 2013 budget, as presented on January 29, 2013, and had discussions with Stephen Rettie, Treasurer, seeking clarification about certain items.

We have the following comments:

1. The Budget Committee and Treasurer are to be commended for the clarity of the information presented in the budget, the use of footnotes to provide further information and willingness of the treasurer to discuss line items and options.

2. The Council is also to be commended for establishing a citizen’s advisory committee to be involved in the establishment of the township budget and to provide recommendations and advice to the budget committee. The advisory committee is well chosen being comprised of 4 members of the public, one of whom is a board member of the MLA, one of whom is a board member of the Muskoka Ratepayers Association and the other two members are well known in the community. On behalf of the taxpayers of the Twp of Muskoka Lakes, the MLA thanks the volunteers for their dedication and long hours of meeting.

3. The budget represents a levy increase of 3.7 per cent. Of this increase, 3.3 per cent is proposed to be monies put into the reserve account to fund current and future capital expenses. This is prudent financial management. The MLA has reviewed the 10 year draft capital plan and recognizes the need to have funds in reserve in order to carry out the township’s obligations. We understand that there are no extraordinary capital costs this year, and that the draw on the reserves for 2013 is compatible with the funds being put into the reserves. We also understand that some of the big ticket items of last year, including legal expenses, have been paid and are not expected to be required for this fiscal year. The Treasurer has confirmed that adequate liability insurance is in place.

4. Muskoka has a two tiered government structure. The MLA continues to be concerned about duplication of services and associated costs. The MLA continues to promote the sharing of services, resources, buying power and administrative functions wherever possible.
5. Within this framework, the MLA views with concern the number of economic development officers being hired by each municipality. Economic development is an important function for Muskoka, but we are concerned that each municipal economic development officer is competing with others in the district for the same scarce resources and funding. The MLA suggests that the economic development officer in each municipality collaborate with their counterparts and determine a niche that is appropriate for the individual municipality. The MLA has initiated discussion about attracting additional economic funding and resources to Muskoka. We would be interested in continuing to work with the economic development officers to better articulate and reinforce their niche in the market. The economic development coordinator for the Township of Muskoka Lakes will be in place for the first time for the full 2013 budget year. We expect a review of accomplishments to be available before the continuing budgeting of this department in 2014.

6. A new full-time position has been established for a by-law enforcement officer for 2013. Until approval of the 2013 budget, a by-law enforcement officer was only available one day per week. The full time position adds substantially to the township budget. The MLA was in attendance at the Mayor’s summer meeting when this issue was discussed. The MLA believes this is an important function to be able to address complaints about noise, illegal parking violations, by-law infractions and neighbours’ concerns. We note that the by-law enforcement officer will be available to perform his function on weekends and in the evenings when a number of complaints are generated. The MLA suggests that the full time by-law enforcement position be introduced for a one year trial period and that prior to the 2014 budget a review of the complaints and workload be undertaken.

7. The building department is mandated to administer fees for permits to be in line with the costs of providing such service. The Planning department does not have a similar requirement. The Planning department’s fees are low in comparison with the fees being required for the same services in other municipalities. We recommend that the planning department undertake a review of their fee structure.

8. Finally, we note that the wage increases being established for township staff are not consistent. Unionized staff have been granted a wage increase in 2012 of 2 per cent. Non union staff will receive a cost of living increase in Muskoka which is 0.8 per cent. Such a difference in wage increases for a relatively small workforce is troubling. We understand that if non union staff were granted an increase similar to the union staff that would lead to an increase of 0.6 per cent in the tax levy. While we are not in favour of increased taxes, we suggest that council review this item to determine if there is a mechanism to reduce the discrepancy.

We thank you for consideration of our comments.

Respectfully submitted

Anne McCauley
Chair of Political & Land Use committee

Michael Langdon
President