WEST MUSKOKA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIC PLAN & URBAN DESIGN GUIDELINES
Town of Bala and West Muskoka

MASTER PLAN AND URBAN DESIGN
Background Report #6

May 8, 2002
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Township of Muskoka Lakes

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1.0 Introduction

A place’s genius loci, or spirit of place is what raises it above the ordinary. This sense of place is the sum of its physical characteristics – the combination of topography, vegetation, water and views, as well as the composition and arrangement of built form. In order for an area to evolve while maintaining its sense of place, it is necessary to understand the relationship of elements that create the unique ambiance that makes a place special, and to develop a plan for retaining and enhancing these special qualities. This report is intended to identify what is special about Bala, and to recommend measures for future development to ensure that the unique spirit of Bala is preserved into the future. This report focuses on design features. Opportunities related to industrial and employment land uses and planning initiatives will be addressed in a separate report.

2.0 Existing Conditions

Bala lies in the heart of the Muskoka recreation region at the confluence of Lake Muskoka (Bala Bay) and the Moon River. It is a community that is characterized by access from water, road and rail and it is indelibly stamped by its history of logging, rail, steam ships and seasonal use. The combination of these forms of access have served to set Bala apart in terms of the resulting arrangement of space, but it also tends to confuse those visiting, or new to the area, by making it difficult for them to visualize the layout of the community and to navigate to focal points within the town.

What is discussed herein are the events that created the physical form of Bala as it exists today. In years past, cottagers and seasonal tourists traveled long distances to arrive at their destination and due to their not having access to good roads and automobiles for quick, convenient travel, they relied on services provided within Bala. Because of the length of time it once took to reach Bala, many families came and stayed for the entire summer season, further increasing the demand for locally provided, basic goods and entertainment. To say that Bala was a “hopping place” would be an understatement; but as road systems improved and access to the area became easier, cottagers no longer relied on Bala for goods, materials and services in the way that they once had.

Now one can drive to Bracebridge or Gravenhurst in relatively short order, and the expansion of goods and services in those communities parallels the decreasing services offered by Bala. This is testimony to the ability to access towns more easily, and the fact that many cottagers now only come on the weekends instead of for the entire summer, which lends itself to bringing food and other goods from home. This transition has left Bala serving a public that requires less, over a seasonal period. The seasonality of the market is one thing that has remained unchanged over the years. In many ways this lack of significant change is the Town’s strength because the attractive historic features are still visible.

2.1 Analysis of Existing Conditions

Key issues arising from discussions with residents and business people are as follows:

1. A need to improve/expand parking and docking facilities (secure and otherwise);
2. A desire to enhance existing village qualities (better access, trails, parks facilities, bridges, boardwalks, docks, walkways, signage, architecture and streetscape);
3. The desire to improve recreational amenities for locals and tourists; and
4. The stated objective to encourage a unique Muskoka theme consistent with the existing character of the community.
Two criteria have been examined in order to identify those elements that are integral to the character of the community of Bala and that should be considered in the development of design guidelines for the community. They include:

1. natural physical characteristics (topography, vegetation, water, views); and
2. built form (materials, scale, style, form, massing, access, landscape, heritage).

### 2.1.1 Natural and Physical Characteristics

Bala lies in an area of steeply rolling topography. Glacial depressions created lakes with steeply sloped rocky shorelines that are now covered by hardwood and white pine forests. The white pine has been immortalized as the living symbol of the Georgian Bay area and the Muskoka region for its sculptural beauty and its ubiquitous presence throughout the area.

Bala itself is centred at the point where Lake Muskoka flows into the Moon River. Lake Muskoka has a highly organic shape broken into many interconnected lobes. Bala is therefore accessible by land, water and by rail.

Figure 1 illustrates the position of Bala relative to its roads, Lake Muskoka and the railroad. The combination of steep rolling topography, and the confluence of three modes of transportation have resulted in the unique layout of Bala and created strong visual patterns upon which the community is based. Both the road and rail systems open views to the water and create the skeleton for the community.

There are a number of key areas in Bala, each defined by the unique physical environment in which they exist:

1. Windsor Park/Bala Bay Inn Area;
2. Kee and Bala Falls Road;
3. The Highway 38 entrance;
4. The Shield Parking Area;
5. Bala Falls & Island Bridges (north & south);
6. Central Commercial Area and Rail lands;
7. Town/Government Dock Area; and
8. The Sports Park.

Depending on your approach to Bala, the Shield Parking Lot, Windsor Park or the Sports Park tend to intuitively form the gateways to the community. The relationship of the other key areas to these gateways is essential to how well the entire area functions for tourists who will seek access to the water, to key areas and to other amenities (washrooms, playgrounds and picnic areas).

Currently, tourists focus their activities at the falls and along District Road 169. Because there is little connection to other attractions along the water and because it is difficult to orient oneself due to the unique layout of the town, visitors may be inhibited from spending longer periods of time in the community. There is much to see in Bala and the challenge is figuring out how to logically connect key elements and to provide opportunities for visitors to stop and stay a little longer.
Windsor Park

As one reaches Windsor Park, the landscape opens to reveal a broad expanse of water, and creates the first sense of awareness of arrival in Bala. The presence of water will be repeated as you move through the landscape. The park itself is generally open and unprogrammed, with little structure to define it. There are public washrooms, an interpretive building and parking on site. Picnic tables and a waterfront area offer other amenities. The park has been used to host Wakestock, which is an enormously popular summer event, requiring tent rental, and generating the need for more parking than is currently available. Across from the park is a classic example of cottage architecture in the form of an old inn that has subsequently been converted into a residence.

In order for the park to create a better sense of entry into Bala Windsor Park needs to be more strongly linked to the Bala Bay Inn Area, which as a little further down the road. In order to fulfill the Park’s potential as a key area in Bala, the following improvements could be considered:

- improved parking and a seating/viewing area;
- a pavilion from which events would be staged;
- controlled access for ticket purchase;
- stronger signage/entrance feature;
- naturalized water front; and
- a stronger relationship to the street.

Windsor Park has been identified as a possible port for the steamships if access to Bala can be arranged. Any improvements to the park should be done with this in mind.
The façade of the building is flat and uniform and the relationship of the building to the street could be further enhanced by a structure between the building and the street (awning, arbour, covered porch), provided that it was in keeping with the architectural style of the building itself.

A stronger relationship to the street is needed in order to encourage access and to create a sense of streetscape in this area. Paving, planting, flags and signage are all elements that have been used to establish a more definitive and connected presence in the landscape, but perhaps an alley of trees to the entrance with paving that connects the street to the building would further enhance this beautiful building’s relationship to the street.

As in other locations, the parking area at the Inn is not clearly marked and thus parking it is not as efficient as it could be. The buildings around the Inn are of a much smaller scale and tend to be located more closely to the street creating an unbalanced landscape and a weak relationship between each side of the street.

Although there are sidewalks, they abut the District road, and they are comprised of the same material as the surface intended for vehicles as well as being at the same elevation as the road. This arrangement clearly defines the environment as being for automobiles and not for pedestrians.
In an ideal world, the Inn would be located much closer to the road, with minimal, or no parking, to separate its entrance from the streetscape. Parking would be to the rear and side of the building with primarily landscaping and pedestrian areas in front of the building. Although the Inn has a history, its future is not certain, and should it be replaced, its relationship to the street should be reconsidered.

Certainly, future improvement and/or reconstruction should maintain the historical architecture of the building and thus its integrity as a major landmark in the community. Currently, the lack of year round accommodation in Bala is an impediment to expanding the tourism market and the Inn represents a significant opportunity to fill that niche if it were to be renovated or rebuilt.

The Kee Area

Photograph 3 - Bala Falls Road View to Kee

The Kee is a major landmark in Bala, and it provides the focal point for entertainment in the community for concerts, dances and galas. Bala Falls Road at this location is a vast section of pavement with no definition and no areas that are designated solely for pedestrian use. The result is inefficient parking (because as in other unmarked areas, improper parking can waste up to 30% of the available spaces) and a poorly defined character for the street. Because District Road 169 ducks under the railway at the intersection, avoiding what used to be the main thoroughfare, the Kee area and Bala Falls road have become somewhat side-lined. Although there is planting at the intersection and the Kee is well known, there is no place that the pedestrian can claim for their own. What is needed in this location is to provide structure to the street, clearly delineating between pedestrian and traffic areas.

With the bridge dominating the intersection, there is no sense of entry onto the street and to the Kee and the commercial area on this section of Bala Falls Road. A newcomer to the area or visitor could miss historic Bala Falls Road entirely. This section of the road is dominated by paving and currently appears as a large, flat, open asphalt field. Signatures like the light standards that appear elsewhere in town do not appear until one reaches the bridge (see photograph 4). Materials and other features that define pedestrian areas more clearly would most certainly enhance the experience of this area.

There is also an opportunity to tie this area to its past with architectural elements, perhaps a music wall of fame, which has been suggested by some of the committee members. The Kee has long been the musical heart of the community and it would appear that it will continue this role in the future. This area should read more like a plaza – pedestrians first and vehicles second, with seating areas and opportunities to stage outdoor events like farmer’s markets and of course, those associated with the cranberry festival. Section 3 will discuss the concept developed for this area in greater detail.
Bala Falls Road

Bala Falls Road used to be the main street through town prior to the construction of District Road 169. Beyond the Kee, Bala Falls Road climbs a slight hill to the cenotaph park, which has a lovely view over the water. Shaded by white pines, it has a couple of picnic tables, a staircase down to the falls and a monument commemorating veterans. The park is a quiet, restful place, but as in most of the other areas having access off of Bala Falls Road, one would most probably find it only by accident.

Past Walker Street, the road curves down to a pretty little bridge with reproduction lighting and flags. The railing detail of the bridge is particularly attractive and reminiscent of the rail crossings in many areas throughout the north. After the vacuous space in front of the Kee, there is certainly a sense of arrival, given the views off of the bridge, but an arrival to what?

Bala Falls Road in this section is attractive, and it draws visitors to view the falls from different aspects; but it is still designed primarily for vehicles. People stop on the bridge to photograph and view the falls, but given the width of the bridge it is not the most comfortable location in which to stop. The location of the bridge and its architecture provide the opportunity to make this area a key feature in the community if it were designed to be more pedestrian-friendly.

Photograph 4 - Bala Falls Road Bridge

The opportunities that exist to cross water are unique to Bala, and a wonderful sensory experience to pedestrians. These features should be enhanced throughout the community to become integral parts of the pedestrian network. But where the bridges lead to is just as important as the bridges themselves in this experience.

In the case of the bridge on Bala Falls Road, it provides access to Divers’ Point, which is an area having tremendous potential to function as an integral part of the tourist’s experience of the waterways of Bala, encouraging visitors to stop awhile longer to picnic or rest in their travels.
Currently Diver’s Point is a gravel parking area that looks out over the government dock and Lake Muskoka. A multi use link is proposed that would connect Divers’ Point to the government dock area for pedestrians and snowmobilers. The bridge would parallel the existing rail bridge. The potential of this area is currently underutilized.

A pretty view up Lake Muskoka and a quiet place to rest and watch the activities at the government dock present the greatest opportunities on which to capitalize. Vehicle access to Diver’s Point has compromised the area as a potential passive park, and restricting vehicle use should be considered as a means of creating a large park adjacent to the water and easily accessible to the Central Commercial Area.

Bala Falls (north & south) and Island Bridges

Water access to Bala is easily achieved from the Lake Muskoka side, the government docks or Divers’ Point. It is less available on the Moon River side, other than at Jaspen Park. Docking for boat access at a number of locations should be considered both for its value as a means of access and because maintaining this form of access is a reflection of the history of the community.

Safe look offs are needed where pedestrians logically stop to take photographs or just to absorb views over the water. Two such areas are at the Moon River dam and at the District Road 169 bridge at the Shield Parking Area.

Docking should be provided on the Moon River side of the road for boat access and linked to the commercial areas with a walkway system. The Highway Bridge is a destination point because of the views offered down the Moon River, however this section of the road, along with all of District Road 169 with Bala is treated like a highway, not intended for pedestrian use. The administration of District Road 169 within the Town of Bala must be more flexible if Bala is to realize its full potential as a tourist destination.
Streetscaping and generous sidewalks along with reducing lane widths to permit parking in some locations along District Road 169 would serve two purposes: to slow traffic and to create a safer, more pedestrian-friendly environment. Many communities have faced the same challenges as their main streets become major thoroughfares. In many cases traffic-calming measure such as reducing ROW widths through key areas, one way traffic and paving changes have served to maintain or enhance the original character of the community, without unduly compromising circulation.

In terms of urban design, traffic should be considered to be secondary to the character of the community and the experience of people within that community, provided public safety is adequately addressed.

Central Commercial Area

The central commercial core is a vital and vibrant part of the community. District Road 169 arcs in a graceful curve just beyond Don’s Bakery and it curves again before heading out of the main commercial area. Buildings that front on this section of the road have little setback, crowding the road and creating a somewhat cramped, but more pedestrian-friendly environment.

Many people are drawn to this area for a bite to eat or a bit of shopping before, and after viewing the falls. The area directly in front of the Bakery that forms a parking lot, is open and does not reflect the same intimacy in the street that exists just beyond the Bakery. This area has opportunities that do not exist elsewhere in terms of the ability to serve visitors more efficiently and to create a better impression of this section of the commercial core. Reducing the lane widths through the downtown core to the general store to the west and to Windsor Park in the other direction on 169, would result in slowing traffic and creating opportunities for parallel parking in key demand areas, as well as widening the sidewalks.
sufficiently to include street trees and furnishings and adequate areas for pedestrians.

Sports Park

As you sweep out of Town toward the north, the location of the proposed Sports Park is on your right. This location at the present time has a distinct sense of entry. Development of the Sports Park will enhance that sense of entry. Logically, as the community grows and expands along District Road 169, this “entry” point will shift because it is formed by the impression of arrival to a place. To visitors that sense of arrival is generally the point at which built form starts to dominate and for residents is can be much subtler, like a hill, a curve in the road, a group of trees, a view or even a scent. This discussion is focused on entry points as a visitor might see them.

Shield Parking and Entrance at Highway 38

Another major entry point to the Town is at the junction of Highway 38 and District Road 169. Highway 38 connects Bala to Highway 400 and the Georgian Bay area. As you arrive at the Town, you see the sign for Bala but the sense of entry is first defined at Jaspen Park, through the built form, views to the water and open space. At the junction of District Road 169, Highway 38 tees into a rock cut of Precambrian shield formed by the construction of District Road 169 or by the Railway overpass. The traveler must decide which direction to go on 169, without benefit of views or adequate signage. The existing street lamp provides some sense of streetscape and arrival into the town, but it is overshadowed by the rock face. Other visual cues including signage to orient travelers could enhance this entrance to the town.
2.1.2 Built Form and Architecture

Materials

The principal materials used for construction over time have been wood and stone and occasionally brick. The majority of the buildings in Town (with the exception of some commercial buildings), are wood frame construction types. There are few brick or block buildings in the community.

Scale

The majority of buildings in Bala are two storeys or less, which affords maximum visibility to the water. Even commercial structures having a much larger footprint than residential buildings do not exceed 2 storeys in height.

Style

Traditionally, commercial buildings in Bala tended to have flat roofs, often with a decorative cornice and/or a parapet. Pictured below is a characteristic commercial building style, with flat façade, approximately 40% window coverage and a slight decorative emphasis at the entrance. There are no significant attempts at ornamentation, and the result is an unassuming and tidy façade that is clearly differentiated from the residential structures in Town, although many former dwellings now house mixed commercial and residential uses.

Although many of the newer commercial structures in Bala have used similar rooflines or have incorporated decorative elements that reflect the architecture of traditional buildings, they fail to entirely capture the spirit of built form in the community. This is principally because they often are situated on their sites in such a way as to maximize parking. Traditionally, properties have had no space provided in front of the building for parking, thus having direct interface with the street and becoming defining elements of the streetscape. Newer developments have located parking spaces between the building and the street, which detracts from the streetscape by prioritizing vehicles over pedestrians. The following photographs are examples:
Form

The form of structures in the Town varies with the use of the building. Places of worship tend to be in stone or brick, with steeply pitched single roofs, small steeples and symmetrically arranged doors and windows.

Photograph 12 – Former Church now Antique Store

In general, the churches are austere with little in the way of decorative details. There is a strong relationship to the street and most of the properties are landscaped with parking provided for on
the street, as is typical for many older religious buildings throughout northern Ontario.

Photograph 13 - Existing Church Use

Residential buildings generally tend to be constructed out of wood and have a variety of rooflines. The porch is ubiquitous throughout the community, providing extended seasonal comfort and space out of the flies and wind. Although lot size varies, in many ways the form of housing reflects the long history of cottage and seasonal use in the area. Residential buildings are often in the form of 1 ½ to 2 storey dwellings and multiple dwelling units are rare. Rental accommodation is not readily available.

Built form tends to be spare in decorative detail although where it does appear it is often quite whimsical, and in the form of fretwork, railings and porch details. Buildings with front porches tend to either be water or street oriented.

Photograph 14 - Residence

Photograph 15 - Residence
**Massing**

The majority of the lots are residential in size with the smaller being approximately 16 metres by 60 metres and larger lots being approximately 50 by 400 metres. The closer to the centre of Town, the smaller the lot size is, and greater the density. It would appear as if density ranges from approximately 5 units per acre to less than 1 unit per acre. Typically, industrial properties are significantly larger than the average lot, although many appear to be too small to significantly expand.

**Access**

Bala is in close proximity to Bracebridge and Gravenhurst and can be accessed by District Roads 169, 118 and 38. Although there is no longer a rail station, the train does pass through Town. The steamships used to come to Bala and the potential to restore this service is being investigated. This would bring tourists to Bala via an alternative form of transportation.

**Landscape**

There are no street trees or significant public landscapes with the exception of Jaspeng Park and to some extent, the government dock area. What is most noteworthy of the community is the natural landscape of rocky shores and beaches, expansive views and water everywhere. Almost the entire Town is within 1700 metres of the falls; 80% of the Town is within 1000 metres of the falls. Approximately 40-50% of the properties have direct access to water and many of the waterfront properties are seasonal, particularly farther from the Town centre. Commercial properties are clustered around the Town centre as one would expect, although demands for parking and property sizes are pushing newer commercial development further from the centre.

**Heritage**

The heritage of the community as a bustling seasonal community and somewhat smaller year round community is apparent. Many of the homes are larger than one typically sees in the north. Some have been converted from inns to residences and some have obviously housed seasonal residents and their extended family and friends. Many of these seasonal dwellings have much more elaborate decorative details than do the year round dwellings, many of which have been converted to commercial and mixed uses along District Road 169. Commercial and industrial buildings vary in size from small retail occupying one floor of a 2 storey dwelling to the size of the Kee or Foodland or the Lumber Store in Town. In terms of heritage buildings, there is truly a “mixed bag” of architecture. Newer buildings and older structures of varying architectural form, details and scale occupy the same landscape creating the unique character of Bala. There is not a defining architectural form that gives Bala its unique sense of space. Even the 70 years or more of music that has made Bala a destination for entertainment does not define the built form.

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**Photographs 16-20 – Residences, Mixed Uses and Commercial**
3.0 Proposed Improvement Areas

The previous chapter summarized key areas in Bala, which with some work, could be improved to better support tourism activities and local events. This chapter identifies the improvements that should be undertaken. The improvements suggested herein are prioritized, although as local initiatives and funding become available, projects of various scales can be undertaken. It should be noted that the sketches in this report are conceptual only, and further details (boundary and topographic surveys) would be required in order to develop detailed design drawings and to provide cost estimates for construction, both of which typically are required in funding applications.

It is proposed that the areas in between the project areas be defined with decorative paving, lighting and common street furnishings to link key areas and provide visual connections between spaces. The following figure delineates the main pedestrian routes that should receive this treatment. The arrows are graphic only and not indicative of the actual direction of pedestrian movement.
3.1 Windsor Park / Bala Bay Inn Area

Windsor Park is used as an event park and it also functions as a local community park. Proposed improvements to this park are suggested in order to improve its viability as an event park and to provide additional amenities for the community's use year round. The topography in the park has been utilized to separate activity areas and control access in the concept that is illustrated on Figure 2. The parking area has been expanded by decreasing the setback from the district road and encroaching slightly into the park itself. Parking spaces are shown as being 3 metres by 5 metres with a lane of 6 metres in width. This does not accommodate trailers, the parking area would need to be substantially larger in order to do so.

Entrance to the park has been concentrated in a single location by the rock/stone wall along the parking area and a low berm (approximately 1 metre height) planted with trees along the District Road. An arbour over the paved walkway is the entry to the park and the existing kiosk has been relocated to the centre of the park to be used for tickets or refreshments at events. The park itself is divided into different areas of activity. A children's play area was proposed near the water, however based on public comment, it was determined to be preferable to have this area as seating or display.

The parking lot is hidden behind a viewing berm formed by a low seating wall and some fill. Seating could be on the wall or on the grassed area. Planting on either side of the park is intended to provide some screening to adjacent landowners. A pavilion is proposed to be located over the rock outcrop, providing a staging area and/or covered display area, which would remove the requirement for tent rental. Finally, the waterfront would be a combination of dock, boardwalk and naturalized shoreline. Furniture in the form of benches and waste receptacles would be located along the walkways and lighting concentrated at the entrance in conjunction with street lighting and paving that extended to Bala Falls Road, thus linking the Inn to the Park. A boardwalk that links the Kee to this section of District Road 169 would further enhance the experience.
3.1.1 Public Comments

The comments received on the original concept indicated that a children’s play area was not required, that the shoreline was naturalized and not a beach, and that one way access to the parking area was not preferred. These changes are illustrated on Figure 2. As discussed earlier, detailed design drawings will require detailed site information not available at present.
Figure 2

WINDSOR PARK
FINAL CONCEPT
3.2 Kee and Bala Falls Road

The Kee is a major destination point and has been for many years. Proposed improvements to this area focus on the following: improving parking in front of the Kee; highlighting the intersection of Bala Falls Road; and District Road 169 and making Bala Falls Road in its entirety more pedestrian friendly.

Figure 3 illustrates the proposed improvements suggested for this area. Street lighting and paving stones are proposed to link District Road 169 more formally to Bala Falls Road. Increased planting at the entrance to Bala Falls Road is also intended to heighten the profile of this street to travelers. Streetlights like those elsewhere in town, with banners of the Canadian flag and the Kee would also assist those seeking to visit the Kee. The location of the Music Wall of Fame relatively close to the intersection in addition to paving stones and decorative lighting will draw the eye down Bala Falls Road.

Parking on either side of the road and decorative paving throughout, will bring commerce out into the street, either in café seating or as display clearly defining pedestrian and non-pedestrian areas. This concept proposes to have a turn around at Walker Street, making Bala Falls Road one way over the bridge and under the railway. Alternatively, this section of the road could be restricted solely to pedestrians in summer and to sledders in the winter. This concept provides the opportunity to expand upon the Cenotaph Park, which is a lovely location to picnic and to view the falls and surrounding area.

Figure 4 illustrates the concept sketch for the cenotaph park which includes removing much of the vegetation obstructing the view, framing the view with a fence, enlarging the paved area around the monument and providing seating. Planting around the monument area will serve to enclose the viewing area and to frame the view.

3.2.1 Public Comments

Comments from the public have indicated that there are favourable and negative responses to limiting through traffic on Bala Falls Road. There are no large open spaces in the centre of the community from which the public has unrestricted access to the water or where they can participate in park activities. If the section of Bala Falls Road between Purk’s Place and Walker Street were restricted to pedestrian and sled use or to one way traffic, Diver’s Point could be developed into a passive park with a pavilion that would serve sledders as well as tourists, by offering a place for snow machines to be parked without access by vehicle, while the sledders walked into Town. The development of the multi use link in this area will definitely create a need for some form of park programming that provides for picnicking and passive recreation.
Figure 3
KEE AND BALA FALLS ROAD
Figure 4
CENOTAPH PARK IMPROVEMENTS
Figures 5 and 5a illustrate two possible scenarios for managing Bala Falls Road. Figure 5 contemplates one-way traffic between Walker Street and the Burgess Church with parking provided at Diver’s Point. Figure 5a allows only pedestrian access between Walker Street and the Church with passive use of Diver’s Point. Each option has advantages and disadvantages. The community needs to decide how they will proceed. As mentioned earlier in the text, there are a number of issues with respect to capitalizing on opportunities for providing amenities to tourists and other visitors to the area including:

- no large public spaces within the core of the Town;
- few viable links to the waterfront;
- poorly used parking areas; and
- improving the desirability of the Town for winter visitors.

Since delivery vehicles cannot safely go under the rail overpass and emergency access through this area could be maintained for fire, ambulance and police vehicles and because District Road 169 provides a vehicular link from one end of the Town to the other, the merits of a large central public space over that of two way vehicle access are, in the professional opinion of the writer, opportunities that are difficult to ignore.

Furthermore, the development of this area as a park with pedestrian access only, will improve safe access to the water and to viewing locations of the falls, create an outdoor space suitable for use in festivals, and offer a reasonable location for public washrooms. Public washrooms become attractions in their own right, increasing the likelihood of travelers stopping and adding to the comfort of those using the area.

In summary, the benefits of a large public open space connected to the government dock and beyond by the multi use link and to the Kee via the Bala Falls Road bridge offer tremendous, long range opportunities to increase the length of time people stay in the area. Visitors will have a central space devoted to pedestrians where they can comfortably spend time and be more likely to avail themselves of the amenities in the commercial area.
Figure 5
MOON RIVER BRIDGE
CONCEPT 1
Figure 5a
MOON RIVER/DIVER’S POINT
FINAL CONCEPT
3.3 Bala Falls (north & south) and Island Bridges

The views from the bridge on District Road 169 are spectacular. The difficulty is that there is very little room for pedestrians to stop and enjoy the view. This area is proposed to have a viewing platform where District Road 169 crosses the Moon River. A large deck should be developed at the location where people walk down the slope to the water. This is shown on Figures 5 and 5a/

Viewing and seating could be offered at both of these locations and the deck adjacent to the church park could have stairs down to the water to provide safer access to the water and to minimize the extent of erosion to the slope in future.

There is some concern over the safety of people in this area and the deck could be used to prevent immediate access to the water and allow for the posting of signage at the top of the slope, which may give people pause for thought before they descend to the water.

Regardless of whether there is a deck there or not, people do want to reach the water. With a deck there is a better opportunity to close off access entirely should safety continue to be an issue by removing the stairs and installing a railing.

There has been significant concern about this area being used for swimming due to the rocks and currents making footing in the water and along the shoreline difficult.

There has also been the desire to capitalize on the proposed multi use link connecting the government dock area to Diver’s Point on the Lake Muskoka shoreline. This bridge and the existing wooden bridge will provide access along the entire waterfront in this area. The treatment of the town dock and connection to Gordon Street via the existing wooden bridge should be considered in the planning of the area.

There is a sliver of municipal property north of the wooden bridge that could be developed to enhance a link between the waterfront and the commercial areas to the north and west. Development for this sliver of land should include paving and furnishings to indicate a connection to key project areas and to the commercial core.

Development of this area is important because it formalizes the pedestrian loop through to the proposed Sports Park and the loop back to the commercial core and the government docks.
3.4 Shield Parking Lot

The Shield Parking Lot is proposed to be the location for a two storey information centre that also functions as a multi-use building, with possibly office space or accommodation on the 2nd floor. Some concern was expressed by the public that a two storey building would compromise the view from the cenotaph park down the Moon River. Subsequent to the public meeting, that view was reassessed and it was confirmed that should the building not exceed the height of the stone church, the view will not be compromised. Clearly during the detail design of the information centre, this will form one of the major design constraints.

In addition to the information centre, which would have one floor oriented to the ground level of the parking area and the upper floor oriented to the level of the bridge, the concept shows an expansion to the paved seating area and a connection to the cenotaph park underneath the rail way. Such a connection would link the parking lot and downtown area to the Kee and provide circular walking routes that would not depend extensively on District Road 169. This is a very important component of the overall improvements proposed that it provides a link to Divers Point and to the cenotaph park, both of which have improvement proposed that will make them key areas.

Further, the entrance to District Road 169 from Highway 38 could be improved with additional furnishings, decorative paving and signage.

3.4.1 Public Comments

The original design concept for the shield parking lot proposed one way access and two entrances as illustrated on Figure 6. Discussions with the public identified traffic concerns and suggested a single entrance/exit at the existing location, which has optimum visibility. The parking lot would thus be rearranged to have no entrance at Highway 38. Figure 6a has incorporated changes based on these comments.

Access to the lot has been restored to two way, although given the survey used as the base plan, which did not depict the rock face, one way circulation within the lot continues to maximize the available spaces by reducing the required lane width to 4 metres. Large tracks, trailers and buses require turning radii that exceed the sites ability to accommodate. Detailed surveys of this area are essential prior to finalizing the parking layout and site plan for the building.

Finally, the building should have year round accessible wash room facilities. Those located at Windsor Park and the arena are not central enough to be visible and to encourage people to stop
Figure 6
SHIELD PARKING AREA

Shield Parking Area
- 70 parking spaces, one way circulation centre island, planting, paving and marking.
- 2 storey information centre/multi-use building, upper level with street access, lower level accesses decks overlooking water.
- pathway to dock on Moon River side of District road 161.
- boardwalk proposed to extend under rail bridge, to Centauri Park (depends on agreement with rail corporation).
- relocation of existing signage and addition of proposed signage to access point.
Figure 6a
SHIELD PARKING AREA
FINAL CONCEPT
3.5 Central Commercial Area

Portage Landing and its environs are the clear indications of arriving in the centre of Town. Unfortunately in this area, there is little public space for pedestrians and parking and vehicular traffic is prioritized over the comfort of pedestrians. For a successful streetscape in this area, District 169 should be narrowed and sidewalk widths increased. The parking area across from Don’s could provide a more distinctive contribution to the street by providing a structural form to define that side of the street, by screening the parking from view, by providing opportunities for seating and by providing an arbor or alley of trees to frame the sidewalk and better define pedestrian space.

The addition of a fountain and signage close to the entrance will further define the walking link to the government docks and through to the snow bridge and beyond. The municipal property linking the snow bridge to Gordon Street should be treated as a paved pathway that runs under an arbor or arch of trees. If an arbor is used it can incorporate kiosk-like information boards of Bala’s history as it relates to the steamship and railways. It will be a pleasant stroll during summer months to complete the circle through Town.
3.6 Sports Park

The Sports Park is a logical terminus and entry point to Bala and it should be linked to the main parts of Town using lighting and paving. Although the design is not being prepared as part of this report it will be a major attraction for sporting events and it will also be an asset for event planning.

3.7 Other Recommendations

Murals

On the arena there are murals relating to the Cranberry Festival and the local history. Although these murals are somewhat small in scale in terms of the desired visibility for this form of art, they do enhance an otherwise bland façade. Careful consideration to both the content and quality of the artwork must be given in order for this form of art to be successful and for it to have the desired impact. Larger scales are essential to murals in that they are first viewed from a vehicle.

Fine examples of this type of art are visible in Gravenhurst, Midland and Pembroke, where the extent and quality of the work has enhanced otherwise blank walls and provided a means of interpreting the history of the area. Although there are facades in Bala that could benefit from this treatment, not all artists are able to paint at the scale necessary to make murals a successful contribution to the community. Ideally, a Committee in charge of managing this type of artwork would ensure consistent quality and vision in its implementation.

Communities in Bloom

Communities in Bloom is an opportunity to lend character to the street in the form of bed, container and hanging basket plantings. Many areas in the community could be enhanced in this way thus contributing to the overall appearance of Bala in the summer months. Key to successful Blooms are uniform basket and container types and concentrating the treatments in highly visible areas that are otherwise devoid of landscape treatments. For example, the liquor store has no planting in front of the building whatsoever. If some of the parking spaces are not required in front of the building, they could be utilized for container plantings or if they are required, hanging baskets would enhance the porch treatment at the entrance to the building.

Throughout the commercial core, baskets could be hung on existing poles and future light standards could be planned to come equipped with basket arms for planters. This would lend a consistent treatment to tie together larger planting areas in key locations. Street intersections are logical areas to highlight plantings for visibility from both pedestrians and vehicles alike.

The Communities in Bloom program enhances many areas of community appearance. There is an active committee that should be aided and encouraged in the implementation of this program. It will enhance many of the community’s attributes.

4.0 Urban Design Guidelines

The following guidelines are general in nature and intended to provide information to future developers in terms of the types of buildings and architectural details that would be consistent with existing built form in Bala. They are not however, intended to be a prescription for future development. Bala is unique because of its inconsistencies. To develop a program for future development to follow would be to establish a “cookie-cutter” that would ensure that everything looked the same.

In order to effect that type of control over development, a by-law would have to be passed. Such a by-law would require extensive consultation on public design preferences prior to its being accepted and endorsed by Council. The intent of this document is to provide direction to future master planning exercises and to provide general guidelines that will serve to:
- enhance pedestrian experience;
- improve the appearance and function of key areas in the community;
- improve movement through the Town; and
- establish basic design parameters for future development.

**Streetscape**

1. District Road 169 should be reduced in width through Bala from Windsor Park through to Burgess Avenue in order to increase the width of sidewalks and create the opportunity for streetscaping in the form of trees, plantings, lighting and furnishings.

2. Maintain and increase public access to the water.

3. Incorporate trails systems with recognizable signage throughout the Town and beyond to areas like the Cranberry Marsh and the Torrance Barrens to improve the range of activities available for tourists.

4. Entry features and plantings should be created at key locations and intersections in Town including but not limited to:
   - Bala Falls Road and District Road 169;
   - Highway 38 and District Road 169;
   - Windsor Park and District Road 169; and the future Sports Park and District Road 169.
   These features should incorporate consistent signage, lighting, plantings and structures. Ideally, they would be part of local horticultural initiatives.

5. Create a large scale map of the area that includes attractions within and beyond Bala that has topographic information, trails, and camping as well as commercial attractions.

**Built Form**

1. Generally not to exceed 2 storeys in height.

2. To be constructed of natural versus man-made materials.

3. To reflect existing built form wherever possible (multi-paned or sash windows, steeper roof pitches, porches etc.)

4. Avoid chain store signage and typical built forms that tend to unify landscapes by making businesses recognizable by structure alone.

5. Colour palette should tend toward heritage colours with the exception of trim and decorative features.

6. Key views should be preserved particularly those opening onto the water.

7. Parking areas should be located to the rear and side of buildings with the exception of on street parking.

8. Commercial buildings should be permitted to locate less than 6 metres from the front property line, even as close as zero setback to maintain the existing relationship of buildings to the street.

9. Generally, signage for businesses should not exceed 25% of the face of the building.

**5.0 Implementation**

As discussed earlier in this document, this report is intended to identify key areas requiring improvement and to develop concept plans for these improvements. More detailed design using more accurate base information will be required to generate accurate cost estimates for funding applications.
With respect to urban design guidelines, what has been provided are general recommendations to guide future development.

**Project Area Prioritization**

The project areas have been prioritized based on the benefit derived from each project irrespective of the actual cost of the project. Depending on funding availability, government goals and objectives with respect to funding, opportunities to develop some projects, or parts of projects may be possible regardless of how they are prioritized herein.

In order to complete a master plan for the entire community, that depicts all proposed improvements, including linkage areas, a complete survey of the project areas will need to be completed. The survey will need to include property boundaries, the location of all native vegetation greater than 100 mm caliper, topography, swales, utilities, existing buildings, curbs and other structures.

At present the information available from which to construct a plan for the entire Town is not consistent, at the same scale, or to the same level of detail.

The following list summarizes the suggested prioritization of projects:

1. **Shield Parking Area**  
   - information centre  
   - walkway connection to Cenotaph Park  
   - parking layout

2. **Cenotaph Park**

3. **Divers Point** (assumes that the multi use link is already built)  
   - park development

4. **Docking on Moon River**

5. **Bala Falls Road and the Kee Area**  
   - music wall of fame  
   - waterfront boardwalk  
   - streetscaping

6. **Central Commercial Area**

7. **Parkette on Gordon Street at north end of the wooden bridge**  
   - pathway, planting and arbor

8. **Windsor Park**

9. **Moon River Deck**