

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE NEW ADDINGTON HIGHLANDS MUNICIPAL COUNCIL

Providing services in a rural municipality like Addington Highlands is a challenge. The tax base is over 95% residential, the geography is very large, and the population derives no direct income from its main asset – crown lands, (controlled by the Province). Basic services: healthcare, education, waste disposal, etc. , that urban dwellers take for granted, are difficult or even impossible to provide to a small, widely-scattered, rural population.

None of this is new. Rural municipalities like Addington Highlands must always try to find creative ways just to maintain existing levels of service, (and hopefully, improve them). It is no secret that successive Provincial governments continue to download responsibilities to municipalities without always making sure that municipalities will be able to cover the associated costs.

The ***Skootamatta District Ratepayers Association***, representing many families from the largest single group of ratepayers in the township, (waterfront property owners – mostly seasonal residents), encourage the new Council to deploy some of municipality's scarce tax dollars in a couple of key areas:

COMMUNICATION

This is the foundation. It is what makes any government not only *credible*, but ultimately, *effective*. A policy of "The public is welcome to call, write, or attend..." is dangerously obsolete today. Electronic distribution of information is low-cost, instantaneous and universal. Good information makes for good decisions. (Deliberate withholding , or delays in releasing public information, is *never* 'in the public interest', and can be cause for litigation).

Information about any and all Council and Committee activities must be made available **proactively**. This public information should be available:

- As soon as possible, (before any meeting, and results within 2 business days after a meeting)
- In complete and accurate detail, (what ideas were put forward, how they were discussed and evaluated, what decisions were made; who voted for/against/abstained)
- Electronically, (published on the internet), so as to be equally available to ALL ratepayers

INVOLVEMENT

Seasonal residents, disabled, and senior ratepayers represent a large and growing human resource that should be actively included in municipal affairs. These ratepayers have skills and energy that could assist Council activities in many ways. Low-tech, low cost technology is available to support their involvement. Because of distance or other factors, many of these people are already skilled users of newer communication technologies.

Council must make an effort to **proactively** involve ALL ratepayers, (not just *invite* participation from those interested and able to attend meetings and other events in-person).

- Facilities should be available to allow any individual Council or Committee member to attend an official meeting by teleconference
- 'Public' meetings should be 'webcast', so that those unable to attend in person can stay informed. (While high speed internet access is still evolving in AH, it is already available in libraries and schools. Webcasts, viewable at these locations, could conveniently serve a large audience remote from the actual meeting . On-line meetings, 'webinars', that allow voice and data communication between members of a small group could enable participation by ANY interested ratepayer with access to a high speed internet connection)
- Any ratepayer(s) who could be impacted by a Council decision should be consulted at the outset of any planning undertaken by Council or any of its Committees. The Reeve and Councillors are elected to make *final* decisions about issues that affect ratepayers. They are neither qualified, nor responsible for doing ALL the research and analysis that should precede a final decision on complex issues. For example, the upcoming review of the Official Plan must include representation from ALL existing citizens groups, lake associations, etc. The SDRA recommends that Council make this a requirement in the contract of the consultant to be hired to gather information and prepare a report for their final approval
- With tax dollars scarce and even declining in some areas, Councillors must avoid gossip and pre-conceived opinions to seek out and objectively examine synergistic solutions to problems for ratepayers in AH. *Involvement*, (negotiation and inevitable compromise), with neighbouring municipalities, or even other non governmental organizations, to obtain the best possible deal for AH ratepayers, could be better than no deal at all.

Sincerely,

Skootamatta District Ratepayers Association