

Opinion

MUSKOKA MOSAIC

Introducing Vi McQuain

BY PAULA BOON

Vi McQuain keeps herself busy. "My kids have trouble getting ahold of me because I'm never home," she says.

But then, the mother of three, grandmother of 15, great-grandmother of 23 and great-great-grandmother of one has always had a lot on the go. Born in 1915 just outside of Bracebridge, she had 12 younger brothers and one younger sister. "There was always a baby to mind as long as I was home," she says.

McQuain, whose family moved to the west end of Huntsville when she was about four, enjoyed school and was so bright, she skipped Grade 5. She says, "I loved to read, but you couldn't read and mind a baby at the same time."

Despite her love of learning, McQuain's first day of high school was also her last. When she saw the list of books she was supposed to buy, she knew her father, a tannery worker at the time, wouldn't be able to afford it. "I thought I should step aside and give some of the boys the chance," she says.

Instead, McQuain got a job looking after the Hutcheson family's children, which she kept until she was married. At age 16 she met her husband Alvin at the arena while watching her cousin Jack Bionda play lacrosse. "Alvin and I chummed together and went to dances for about two years before we were married," she says.

Soon McQuain was busy caring for her three children and keeping house. She and Alvin also had many friends, and their

home was often full in the evenings. "If we wanted to go somewhere, we had to eat and get out by 6 p.m. or our friends would be there, talking and playing music," she says.

As the years passed by, McQuain joined various community service groups. She has been a Rebekkah since the club started around 1950, and soon after that she helped form a group which still entertains at area retirement homes. "We started at Rowanwood, the last Friday of every month," she says. "I'm going to miss going there now that it's burnt down."

As a founding member of the Community Policing Committee, McQuain seldom misses a meeting. "They do a lot for kids," she says.

She has also been a member of Trinity United Church for many years. "I was part of UCW Unit 4," she says. "A few years ago we lost seven members in one year. Two others are now in homes. I'm the only one left."

When her two younger children were in grades 6 and 7, McQuain got a part-time job at Sears. "I worked there 24 years, the last 11 as manager," she says.

In 1979, she and Alvin built a house on the river, and she retired soon after. But she didn't slow down. She became a Meals on Wheels volunteer, and she convinced her husband, who didn't



like to fly, to travel with her to places like the Bahamas and Mexico. The two celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary before Alvin died about 18 years ago.

McQuain was one of the founding members of Club 55, and she still spends much of her time and energy there. "I've been president three different times and been on the entertainment committee for many years," she says. As chair of the entertainment committee, McQuain looks after dances and parties, plus Fun Nights every Wednesday. She also organizes the bid euchre tournament on the third Thursday of every month.

If there's one thing McQuain would like to change about Huntsville it's the parking situation. She says the seniors have to park too far from Club 55, especially if something is happening at the theatre. Then she smiles and says, "But those are all things I can't do anything about, so I might as well shut up."

When asked how she would describe herself to those who haven't met her, McQuain thinks for a moment. "What you see is what you get," she says. "I'm just me."

Thanks to Shirley Grummet for suggesting that Vi McQuain be profiled.

Complaints from rural taxpayers dominate meeting

— CONTINUED FROM PAGE A1

Cairns read in the same meeting after the delegations, the non-urban tax levy for water and sewer was not a suggestion.

Before that fact was made clear — rural residents stated their case.

Most of the residents explained they already paid for their own water treatment systems.

"Our cottagers install state-of-the-art septic systems for which they pay," said Clint Rohr, president of the Kahshe Lake Ratepayers' Association. "They also pay to dispose of the waste in a manner that doesn't contaminate the lake — there is significant cost in this and cottagers pay 100 per cent."

There were those who suggested rural residents already pay too much to support urban services.

"Cottage dwellers and seasonal residents are already paying taxes comparable to fulltime residents, many never having had children in the Muskoka school system," Margaret Wauchope of Fraserburg and District Community Corporation said to great applause.

Other residents, like Jennifer Milne of the Wood Lake Cottagers Association, prepared speeches, which they read with emotion.

"If we had had the option of using municipal water and sewer systems, be assured we would have been delighted to make use of that option," Milne said. "The reality is that Wood Lake will not see this possibility in our lifetime or that of our children or probably our grandchildren's lifetime."

Milne had 133 signatures against the suggested tax. She added that councillors' decisions on this matter would be recorded and remembered at election time.

Residents suggested the tax was a quick fix.

"For the district to consider taxing the rural residents for water and sewer and wet waste programs they don't and can't use is nothing more than a tax grab," said Ed Kapusniak.

Others suggested the district look at the situation in reverse.

"If the district wants to charge fees for rural areas that are not on town services then the district should be responsible for upkeep on rural septic and wells," said Wauchope. "If indeed the tables were turned and you were suggesting that urban dwellers be required to help pay for rural water and septic systems, you would be getting an even louder outcry than you are."

Richard Hogg of the Bella Rebecca Community Association said taxes are already too high.

"I get phone calls constantly every year from elderly residents on our two lakes with tears in their eyes (saying) that they cannot afford their taxes (and) that they are going to have to sell their cottage," said Hogg.

After the delegations, Cairns presented the debt reduction initiative, formulated to help address the district's \$106 million debt.

According to Cairns, the current issue is that water and sewer services account for 60 per cent of Muskoka's capital expenditures, and 90 per cent of its debt increase in the last four years.

In addition, local water and sewer rates, at \$155 per month, are among the highest in the province.

Cairns outlined the report's 16 recommendations, which include increases to development charges and lagoon haulage charges.

Further to Cairn's presentation, district chair Gord Adams presented his own take on the situation.

Adams said when Muskoka municipalities build or upgrade water and wastewater plants, they generally build more than is needed by the current users.

"Typically the plants are designed and built to accommodate 20 years of new growth as identified in Muskoka's growth studies," said Adams.

In addition these plants, in many cases, are necessary to address "serious environmental and health issues in some communities." Decisions were made to build now to take advantage of federal and provincial grants.

Adams added that historically, Muskoka has set development charges far below the true cost of providing the services.

"Currently, the water and sewer urban service area and the users are being held responsible for all the costs," said Adams, who asked if this was fair.

He suggested supporting the debt reduction initiative to help resolve the issue of debt.

After the speeches and Cairn's report, Muskoka Lakes Mayor Susan Pryke was the first to note that Cairns did not include a recommendation for a rural tax levy in his report.

"Not one of those recommendations considers a non-urban tax levy," said Pryke.

However, that doesn't mean the idea is totally off the books.

Graydon Smith, Bracebridge district councillor, warned the suggestion could still come up in future meetings.

"The great majority of people in this room don't want to see a levy increase...but we are never more than a motion from two councillors and the agreement of council (away) (from) have(ing) a discussion in the future," said councillor Graydon Smith.

In the end, councillors decided to hold off on a final decision on the debt reduction report.

Some were not convinced all the suggestions were good for the district.

"If I had to vote on this bundle today, I couldn't do it. I would have to oppose it because while there are some very good things in this report, things that I do support, there are also some miscellaneous items that I really don't like," said Muskoka Lakes district councillor Stewart Martin.

Many councillors suggested they vote on each recommendation, 16 in total, individually.

The committee deferred a decision on the recommendations until the Sept. 2 meeting of Muskoka district council.

Some of the proposed solutions Muskoka's \$109 million debt include: an increase to development charges from \$10,404 to \$19,900; an increase in local improvement connection charges; an increase in lagoon haulage charges to \$40 for 2009 and a \$10 increase each year until a 50 per cent target is achieved; transferring \$2 million from Muskoka's general capital reserve fund to the debt reduction reserve fund; financing the principal of Muskoka's mature debentures from the debt fund; using the debt fund to finance internal loans for capital projects at zero or minimal interest rates; and using the Muskoka's federal gas tax funding to finance sewer related capital projects until such time as the dept levels are stabilized and reserve fund balance are at viable levels.

For the complete report see the District of Muskoka's website at www.muskoka.on.ca under government.

Study recommends major increase in development charges

BY KAREN LONGWELL

A new bylaw could see Muskoka's development charges nearly doubled for those looking to build new residential structures, and increased almost ten times for non-residential developments.

The current bylaw governing the district's development charges expires Nov. 1, said Gary Scandlan, associate director of Watson & Associates Economists Ltd., the company undertaking a study on Muskoka's current rates.

Scandlan spoke to Muskoka's corporate and emergency services committee Aug. 15. He presented his company's study, along with a number of proposed changes to local development charges.

The changes could see development charges for a single detached residential unit rise from the current \$10,400 to approximately \$19,500, an increase of over \$9,000.

Charges for non-residential spaces could increase from the current \$14.26 per square metre

to \$144.56 per square metre.

In rural areas, the picture is a little rosier with charges for single family homes increasing from approximately \$5,400 to approximately \$6,900. But non-residential charges in rural areas could jump considerably from \$4.58 per square metre to \$26.59 per square metre.

According to the report, affordable housing projects could still be encouraged by deferring development charges for those projects, but limiting the number of builds to 60 units in a calendar year.

According to Scandlan, the purpose of development charges is "to recover the capital costs associated with residential and non-residential growth within a municipality."

"(The charges) help recover money to build infrastructure (like) roads, sewers and water mains," he said.

Development charges do not provide for things like parkland acquisitions, halls, tourism and arts and culture facilities.

Scandlan pointed out that because of new regulations aimed at avoiding another incident like Walkerton, where e-coli bacteria contaminated the municipality's water supply, costs for water and sewer projects have increased.

Funding for such projects comes from development charges or rates, taxes and reserves, he noted.

"If you want any level of growth, there are charges," said Scandlan.

Stephen Cairns, district commissioner of finance and corporate services, said district staff met with stakeholders as part of the study process on the proposed rate hikes.

He invited developers from the Muskoka Homebuilders' Association and other groups to a meeting to inform them of the report last week.

Claude Doughty, Huntsville mayor, asked how stakeholders reacted at the meeting.

"No one was taking their shoes off and banging the table," said Cairns.

Cairns said those attending the preliminary

meeting probably need some time to read and understand the study.

He is expecting feedback in the form of letters, e-mails or attendance at an upcoming public meeting on the topic.

Doughty said he believes the proposed changes could negatively affect the number of people who want to build in Muskoka.

A public meeting will be held to discuss the development charges background study and proposed by-law Sept. 22 at the District Municipality of Muskoka office in Bracebridge.

Oct. 3 is the deadline for comments and submissions from the public.

Council will consider the adoption of the background study and passage of a new development charges bylaw Oct. 14.

If passed, the new bylaw will take effect Nov. 1.

The full development charge background study is available online on the District of Muskoka's website.



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