



MMRA Watchdog

Spring 2004

The Watchdog is the newsletter of the Mississippi Mills Residents' Association

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Attend an MMRA Board Meeting

Every month the MMRA Board meets. The days and times are posted at www.mmra.ca

All meetings are open to members. The Board welcomes all input. Please contact any member of the Board, if you plan to attend. Contact information at www.mmra.ca or 256-5837.

MMRA Annual General Meeting

Notice

Mark your calendars:

the MMRA AGM is May 12th 2004
at JR's Restaurant, Almonte
(downstairs meeting room)
at 7:30 PM

Some of what you'll see on the agenda:

- year-end report from MMRA Board President
- members-only vote to fill vacancies on the MMRA Board
- special guest-resident from the community to speak about: *New & Exciting Growth in Mississippi Mills*
- membership renewal
- general discussion and social gathering

See you there!

It is easier to lead a herd of a thousand camels, than a company of two people.
—Arabic proverb

Growth Management & Strategy

On July 8th of 2003, the MM council passed a Growth Strategy motion that approved a population growth to 18,500 by the year 2026 (from 11,600 in 2001). This growth is to be split in the areas of Almonte (on public water & sewer), rural areas (on private services), and other rural areas using “innovative technology” in the ratio of 50% / 30% / 20%. These are planning estimates – they were derived after much debate and represent a number that the community as a whole more or less feels comfortable with.

So what does this mean to the average Missmillian?

Doing the math, this translates to yearly housing starts of about 45 in Almonte, 27 in rural areas, and 18 using innovative technology. These values will increase slightly on a yearly basis as they are calculated as a percentage of population growth.

How does this Growth Strategy affect decisions about our aging infrastructure? What happens when a developer walks into town planning a large subdivision?
...continued on page 3

Membership Alert! Current MMRA members please renew your membership for the year 2004. You can use the form on page 6.

The Property Tax Assessment Debate

This article is extracted from a lengthy report on taxes & assessments submitted by the MMRA to the Town.

(the entire document is available at www.mmra.ca)

While public anxiety mounts concerning the property assessment issue, the following points are worth bearing in mind:

1. A net increase in assessments doesn't translate into an increase in the Town's total take on property taxes, but only if the Town holds steady on its annual expenditure budget.
2. The Town has no control over assessments (assessments are imposed by the Province) but the Town does have control over tax rates applied to these assessments to produce the revenue it requires. If aggregate assessments (provincial) go up, perhaps 40%, the Town can lower its tax rate by 40%, thus rendering the assessment increase revenue neutral.
3. If the Town does need an increase in revenues, a look at the budgeting process makes this clear. An effective budget setting process should ensure the Town's new budget strikes a reasonable balance between the municipal services we want and the tax money needed to pay for these services. There is an inescapable trade-off here: no free lunch. Openness and transparency in the budget making process helps to make taxes make sense.
4. But, looking at averages is as helpful as putting a man's head in the freezer and his feet in the fireplace and then assuring him he will be comfortable. The assessment tide does not raise all boats equally. Most assessments vary from the average, in some cases by a wide margin, and this leads to social hardships.
5. The Town does have some wiggle room for dealing with social hardship. A more flexible tax rate structure could be developed to gradually phase in greater than average individual tax increases over a period of years.
6. It is possible to appeal your Municipal Property Assessment Corporation (MPAC) assessment, but be careful. If you believe you could get more than your assessment if you sold your property, the appeals process may come to the same conclusion and increase your assessment. (www.mpac.ca or phone 1 866 296-6722)
7. Lobby the Province to change its antiquated property tax system. The system is intrinsically inequitable and there are better ways to finance municipalities.

—Reiner Hollbach

...and more opinion on the tax process...

We all know the powerful arguments which properly establish municipal taxes as perverse, inequitable and now, with market value assessment, on a mad path to close down small businesses, while making larger ones globally non-competitive.

To rub further madness into the equation, MPAC is currently recruiting a new President & CEO, at a salary of up to \$250,000 plus benefits per annum, requiring "strategic" vision and defining this as a unique "entrepreneurial opportunity." The only real strategic vision required is to put this corporation out of business, for with fundamental tax reform, MPAC could be eliminated entirely. Extensive literature spells out a number of options. With over 1,500 employees, 35 offices and a budget of over \$140 million, the first benefit of reform would be the substantial savings in eliminating this archaic bureaucracy. Tax reform requires real courage and resolve. Perhaps as never before in recent history, the time is ripe for this kind of grass-roots demand.

—Dan Coates

...and a reply from Councillor
Alex Gillis:

I will ensure that council and staff see the MMRA brief on assessments, taxes & the budgeting process as part of our ongoing budget process.

I do agree that our property tax system could be improved, but that is a long term affair, for now we must work with it. Regarding the cases for low-income residents: it is mandatory to help low income seniors or low income persons with disabilities under the Municipal Act 2001, Section 319. This mandatory tax relief must be provided by both the Town and the County.

We also have the option under the Municipal Act 2001, Section 365, to assist others with relief from burdensome property tax increases. I suggest that these specific cases be raised with the Treasurer for action. The Town's Treasurer often deals with difficult tax problems.

Our County representatives (Al Lunney & Ed Wilson) are fully aware of the large impact that the County has on our total property tax bill (about 41%) and are trying to address this. They have been asked to work to avoid a full assessment based tax increase at the County level, as occurred last year.

I am personally pre-occupied with municipal taxes. We are doing everything possible to limit our municipal budget needs and want to limit the required tax levy to that which is essential. This process should allow for an adjustment to the tax rates to counteract the large average assessment increase (over 16% for residential).

There will be a **Public Meeting on the 2004 Municipal Budget, at 7:30 PM, on Monday, March 29th at the Almonte Community Centre (the Arena) Upper Hall.** Council will present the revisions made to date, and request discussion on future direction.

The plan is to bring the Budget to Council for approval on April 13th, 2004.

Let's look at two scenarios:

Almonte's Sewage Lagoon Capacity

An engineering report last summer estimates that the remaining sewage lagoon capacity is 1000 persons, i.e. 400 houses. Using the adopted growth strategy and the lagoon capacity of 400 houses, the lagoons will last no more than 8 more years (which coincidentally is the same amount of time needed to develop a business case and undertake all the environmental studies required to upgrade the lagoons or build a new sewage plant).

However if the remaining capacity is actually smaller than reported above (which is more likely than not, given the lagoon's semi-consistent violations of the Ministry of Environment's rules)—then 8 years seems optimistic.

So then what? Restrictions on residential growth in Almonte or an all-out growth freeze to ensure the lagoons last longer? And business growth? Might a new company be told it can not move into Almonte because there is no sewer capacity? Should Council force more rural growth? And, if so, at what cost to the agriculture industry, wear & tear on our roads, policing and so forth?

How *will* the remaining capacity of the Almonte lagoons be managed?

Growth and WTR

White Tail Ridge is a large proposed development – 173 housing units approved. If one adds up yearly housing starts beginning in 2004 in the third (innovative technology) category, WTR eats up over nine years of growth - until about the year 2013.

As we all know, competition is good for the economy and consumers. What then happens if WTR consumes all category three development for the next 9 years? What if one or two of the proposed developments in Almonte equalled all of Almonte's developments for the next 8 years? Are these desirable outcomes for current and future residents of MM?

How *can* these types of large developments to be managed by the town?

Necessary Growth Management

The way we choose to grow has a profound effect on the town's fiscal and urban planning. Planned growth is part of our reasonable preparations for the future of our communities.

Essentially, growth management is the allocation of growth resources in a systematic and planned manner. The Growth Strategy and the new Community Official Plan will set out the guidelines for acceptable growth now and in the future, but without a growth management bylaw to state HOW growth is implemented - there is no effective implementation plan.

Miss. Mills is not alone in this requirement. Communities around us and the CMHC (Canada Housing and Mortgage Corp.) are discussing this issue. Many mid-size US urban areas such as Harvard, Amherst, Rowley (MA) already have growth management and lot allocation bylaws in place.

Our town needs to manage future growth properly and the Growth Strategy, the new Community Official Plan (COP), and a Growth Management Bylaw are the tools that will help us do this. At this point in time we only have the first of these—the new COP is well underway but not yet ready. Still growth planning decisions are being made.

To manage future growth properly another tool in the Town's belt is now necessary—a growth management bylaw based on the already adopted Growth Strategy.

Further information & references at: www.mmra.ca

—George Yaremchuk

The Almonte Lectures

One head can not hold all wisdom.

(a Maasai proverb)

Ancient Greek Fighting Ships —A.Trevor Hodge
26 March '04—United Church Hall, Almonte—7:30 PM

The Geoheritage Project:
Where does Almonte fit in? —J.Allan Donaldson
23 April '04—United Church Hall, Almonte—7:30 PM

Sustainable Homes & Communities
Jane Thompson—21 May '04—United Church Hall,
Almonte—7:30 PM

Minister of Finance announces changes to seasonal campground assessments

Issue: The Minister of Finance, the Honourable Greg Sorbara, announced the cancellation of assessments on trailers in seasonal campgrounds for the 2003 taxation year. The Minister also announced the suspension of changes in the assessment classification of maple syrup production facilities from “farm” to “industrial” for the 2004 taxation year.

Maple Producers Elated

Maple producers in Pakenham Ward are breathing a spring sigh of relief. The Ontario government-backed MPAC assessment, which would have reclassified their syrup operations as “industrial”, likely sapping their income with large increases in municipal & county taxes, has been reversed. Maple producers are still “agricultural” (for now).

—Doug Fleming

As a result of court decisions, the Municipal Property Assessment Corporation (MPAC) had begun assessing trailers that exhibit characteristics of permanency in all trailer parks and campgrounds for the 2003 re-assessment. Now, the Ministry of Finance has cancelled these notices for the 2003 taxation year.

For maple syrup production facilities, the government has suspended reclassification for the 2004 taxation year. The government is calling on MPAC, maple syrup producers, and representatives of the broader farming community to develop mutually acceptable criteria for deciding what constitutes the industrial production of maple syrup.

Action: The Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) will continue to monitor the situation. AMO maintains its position that all residential units located in trailer parks, campgrounds, and land lease communities be assessed and taxed at the residential rate if they meet the criteria of being assessable property by exhibiting characteristics of permanency.

Revolution in the Woods

There is growing anger and frustration in the fields and woods of Eastern Ontario. People who live close to the land and from the land are going against their normal, quiet nature, to make a fuss.

About 300 people packed the upstairs hall of the Pakenham arena March 2 to tell stories of government meddling and mean-spiritedness. Under the banner of Rural Revolution, they announced to the assembled mass of country folk, media and politicians that the days of the layback, rustic, country hick are over.

The theme of the night was the need to grab back control of private property from bureaucrats at all levels of government. The driving force behind the evening, Randy Hillier, president of the Lanark Landowners Association (LLA), says they have counted over 1000 laws and regulations that are treading on their rights and making life on the land difficult. The list includes urban-oriented property

standards by-laws, gun control, environmental laws that target the “little guy” while ignoring big polluters, heavy-handed regulations and tax laws that kill rural businesses, and controls on the use of private property that amount to confiscation without compensation.

Last fall, the LLA organized an “illegal” deer hunt as a protest because farmers couldn’t legally shoot deer that damage their crops. That got the attention of Queen’s Park. Now farmers can get special kill permits.

It is very clear, some people are ready for more such civil disobedience. As Mr. Hillier said: “We’ll get them to back off or we’ll shove them off.”

It is a sad truth that most of the laws governing the countryside are crafted by people who live in cities and towns. **It’s also sad that law-abiding rural residents have to resort to civil disobedience before they’re taken seriously.**

—Shaun McLaughlin

...And an excerpt from Bill Duncan’s email update on the first LLA act of civil disobedience in March (a demonstration and information picket line with tractors and other machinery on Highway 29, near Arnprior) :

You see even a small group of people have great power, this experience was empowering; everyone felt they were making a real difference—and they were.

Arts Community Update:

Can a Phoenix rise from the G.L. Comba School?

Background

A new entity, The Mississippi Mills Community & Cultural Centre Corporation, is hoping to purchase the old G.L. Comba School and grounds to refit it as a Cultural Centre for our community. Whenever a school property is declared redundant, the school board is obliged to offer it to any other school board servicing the area. On refusal, the board must then offer it to the municipality (whose taxes paid for the property) for community use. Should that fail it is now free to sell for fair market value.

Current situation

As of February 19th 2004 a letter from the Town was sent to the Upper Canada District School Board (UCDSB) with comments on the latest draft version of the agreement of purchase. This letter was the outcome of consultation between the Town and the MM Community and Cultural Centre Corporation. As yet there has been no reply.

Once a purchase agreement is approved, then negotiations can begin. Plans for the rehabilitation and future use of the property follow.

The Future?

The hope for a vibrant new community centre surrounded by open space, has attracted many groups & individuals ready to commit time, energy & funding. Such a facility would wonderfully complement the existing Almonte Community Centre and Gemmill Park.

—Reva Dolgoy

Traffic study and preliminary design of Ottawa Street, from St. James Street to Appleton Side Road.

The proposed study would consider traffic and pedestrian movement, including road layout and sidewalks, this would reduce congestion and improve safety and efficiency.

A motion has been adopted that the Roads and Public Works Committee recommend Council have the study and design conducted, and that this project be given prebudget approval with an upset limit of \$20,000.00; and furthermore that a staff review team including the CAO, the Town Planner, The Director of Roads & Public Works, and the EDO be established to oversee this project including drafting the Terms of Reference and request for proposal.

The MMRA adds: A request that a provision for greenspace be included. And could the terms of reference include the town “gateway” concept?

Community Official Plan Update

After 2½ years of public consultation and bi-weekly meetings, the Community Official Plan Steering Committee (COPSC) is poised to release a “Discussion Draft” of the Mississippi Mills Community Official Plan later this spring.

Following the endorsement of the “Growth and Settlement Strategy” by Council last fall, the COPSC has focused much its energy discussing policy options related to the protection of water resources, commercial and industrial development, protection of agricultural lands, the supply of affordable housing, recognition of our heritage resources, and maintaining our rural/small town character—to name but a few.

The Discussion Draft will contain detailed planning policies and land use maps, building upon the results from the Goals and Actions Survey carried out in the fall of ‘02. The COPSC will conduct extensive public consultation on the Discussion Draft throughout the summer and early fall of this year. It is anticipated that a final draft of the Community Official Plan will be presented to Town Council for adoption by the end of 2004.

The community official plan will affect you!

Please make sure you take the time to review the Discussion Draft or attend one of the many public consultation meetings to learn what is being suggested for the future of your Community. For more information call Forbes Symon, Town Planner at 256-2064 ext. 259

—submitted to the Watchdog by Forbes Symon

MMRA spring 2004

Notice to MMRA Members:

The MMRA will soon be incorporated with a Constitution. The Objects of the Association are:

- (i) to enhance the life and living conditions of the residents of the Town of Mississippi Mills (herein after called the “Town”) through a philosophy of civic idealism, and by the promotion of democracy, justice, general welfare and equal opportunity;
- (ii) to ensure that each resident is given an enhanced opportunity to democratically participate in the economic, civic and environmental affairs of the Town,
- (iii) to research and investigate issues of civic concern, and to inform its membership;
- (iv) to further the education of residents in civic values, including their rights and responsibilities;
- (v) without limiting the generality of the foregoing, to provide a framework for the identification of civic issues on which feedback from residents to Council is an important element in the constructive interface between elected officials and residents;
- (vi) To contribute to the intellectual life of the community by encouraging debate on subjects of broad societal and environmental interest; and
- (vii) to operate the Association without purpose of gain or profit for the members.

Program Review... a note from the Mayor

I want to update you on a new initiative, the program review process. In order to obtain a better understanding of all of the functions that are undertaken as part of running this municipality and as a means to determining if we are providing services efficiently and effectively, we have commenced this program review.

Each department is being looked at in terms of the services it provides, whether they should be provided, how they are provided, and examining if there are better ways of doing business.

To begin this process, a Program Review Team has been established. The members are listed on the town website (www.town.mississippi-mills.on.ca). Council will provide ongoing updates as to any recommendations that result from this program review. Your input or suggestions for improving service delivery are always welcomed.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me or any member of the Program Review Team.

—Mayor J.A. (Al) Lunney

And, last but not least... the White Tail Ridge Update

The White Tail Ridge process continues. On November 6, 2003, the outgoing Council passed a motion to approve the Draft Plan and Conditions of Draft Approval for White Tail Ridge.

In January of 2004, our new Council passed a motion to allow for a sixty-day review of the entire plan before it went before Lanark County Council for final approval. During this period, Council identified several areas where they desired amendment. They met with the developer, R. W. Connelly, who basically refused to make any changes with the exception of a slight restructuring of the lot layout surrounding a central park (and water & sewage utility area). The developer has threatened legal action, if Council causes any further delays.

On March 9, 2004, Council passed a motion approving the plan and conditions once again, and have sent these on to the County for final approval. Essentially, if anyone opposes this sub-division at this point, their recourse is to specific Ministers at the provincial government. This course is being investigated.

—Stewart Yeaman

— dog tag —

MMRA—The Mississippi Mills Residents' Association
The Watchdog is the newsletter of the MMRA. The Watchdog broadcasts information & decisions from the Board of the MMRA, and keeps members up-to-date on current issues and municipal affairs in Mississippi Mills. (Published as required.)



Our bark is no worse than our bite.

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Jill McCubbin
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Mississippi Mills Residents' Association—MMRA

2004—Membership Registration Form—also available on-line at www.mmra.ca

The MMRA is a non-profit residents' association. To join by mail: MMRA 2 Tatra St. Almonte ON K0A 1A0

Your membership donation will help cover the costs of organizing meetings, advertising & communications.

Please join the MMRA to help protect & enhance our wonderful community of Mississippi Mills.

last name(s):

first name(s):

mailing address:

home phone number:

town:

membership fee (circle one):

postal code:

individual: \$15

family (2 members): \$25

email address:

donations are appreciated: \$

TOTAL enclosed: \$

residence (circle one):

Blakeney Almonte Clayton Appleton Ramsay Rural Pakenham Pakenham Rural

And a reminder to current MMRA members: time to renew your membership. Thanks!