


Executive Summary

The District of Muskoka is well-known for being Ontario's cottage country. Thousands of people flock to the area to experience its vast wealth of natural features, including over 650 freshwater lakes. As the number of permanent and seasonal residents in the region continues to rise, there are increased development pressures and associated impacts on the recreational water quality in the area. This paper investigates the current land use planning policies and tools in place in the District of Muskoka with respect to waterfront development through a comprehensive literature review and further explores the issue through a case study analysis of the Official Plans of several lower-tier municipalities and the upper-tier municipality. More specifically, this report will address the following questions:

- 1. Are current land use policies and comprehensive plans in the District Municipality of Muskoka supportive of inland lake water quality protection?**
- 2. What land use planning tools are currently available to implement the land use policies as set out in the applicable Official Plans, particularly relating to inland lake water quality?**
- 3. What are the limitations of land use planning policy implementation for water quality protection?**




This research provides insight into the existing policies and tools in place that are being used to control waterfront development in Muskoka, as well as protect the area's most valued economic and natural resource – water.

Qualitative methods including a comprehensive literature review and a qualitative case-study evaluation of existing municipal official plan policies were used to answer the above noted research questions, including the use of an evaluative framework. An additional literature review of relevant additional policies, programs, and tools included in municipal or quasi-municipal programs within the District was also undertaken to better understand how these policies were implemented and whether there is a strong relationship or any obvious gaps between policy and practice.

As a result of this research, it was found that the Official Plans in Muskoka generally appear to contain very strong policies about waterfront development and lake system health. Each Official Plan includes specific, measurable policies like setbacks, a variety of best practices for stormwater and phosphorus management that can be implemented, and no shortage of general policies that indicate a high level of support for the maintenance and improvement of inland lake water quality. Unlike other areas of the province, the policies in effect at the District include direct links to Muskoka-specific studies completed as part of the Lake System Health Program.

Overall, the findings suggest that while the connection between water quality and shoreline/waterfront development policies has been growing stronger since the 1970s, there is still more work to be done in linking policy



implementation to ongoing monitoring for a more flexible and rapid approach to improve or address water quality moving forward.

However, there is still room for improvement. Based on the findings of this research, recommendations proposed include the following:

1. That additional work be done to respond more quickly to rapidly changing water quality conditions, and as a result of Official Plan or other background document updates.
2. That lower-tier municipalities should ensure that their Official Plans are in conformity with the most recent upper-tier plan at all times to avoid confusion due to outdated policies and processes.
3. That more frequent monitoring of plan efficiency and effectiveness be implemented through an expansion of the existing water testing program to cover more lakes on an annual basis.
4. That the District and/or its partner organizations create and promote an educational campaign.
5. That the District ensure that all stakeholders (Area Municipalities, Lake Associations, Planners, Residents, and Members of Council) are clear on the goals and objectives of the Lake System Health Program.
6. That the Muskoka approach to developing local policy, programs and tools be shared with other Ontario municipalities, particularly in areas that also do not have a Conservation Authority.