

MLA/Friends of Muskoka response to MRA “**Stance on Candidate Endorsement**”

Muskoka elections are unique. Because Muskoka is one of a kind.

Our famous (though fragile) natural environment deserves world-class protection. And our elections are unique because both seasonal and permanent residents share responsibility for deciding how Muskoka will grow.

Unfortunately, Ontario municipal elections take place long after most seasonal residents have decamped to their “other” homes. That means they miss most of the campaigning, and most of the news about the campaign.

For years, the Muskoka Lakes Association has kept its members informed year-round about local issues and political news. And every four years the MLA has helped its members identify candidates who share their mission of preserving Muskoka for future generations.

This year, the MLA joined forces with the Friends of Muskoka, and a number of cottage associations, to publish lists of candidates whose values are considered to be most aligned with those of the Friends and the MLA. These lists have been developed for the Township of Muskoka Lakes, Township of Seguin, and the towns of Gravenhurst and Bracebridge.

Soon after the MLA/Friends released their first list of aligned candidates in August, protest emanated from another local interest group, the Muskoka Ratepayers Association. In an article printed on its website and reprinted on MuskokaRegion.com, the MRA criticized our type of activity for what they implied was telling people how to vote. The MRA did their best to paint our activity as something sinister, contending that they themselves remain absolutely neutral at election time.

We believe Muskokans should hear the other side of the story. Our response comes in five parts:

- It is perfectly legal and legitimate for community groups to participate in the election process. Local newspapers, businesses and associations endorse candidates all the time -- it is an essential part of our democratic process.
- Our process has always been fair and transparent. The MLA/Friends published its list of Five Key Values for all to see. Our work has been well documented in communications that are open to everyone.
- Seasonal residents are generally under-represented in Muskoka voting (and in the composition of Muskoka councils). The MLA/Friends’ activity helps address this imbalance, by ensuring that out-of-town voters understand the issues and become more familiar with promising candidates.

(We note with chagrin that with six local municipalities in Muskoka – plus Seguin Township, which is part of Parry Sound District – it is hard for local media to report in detail on local politics, especially at election time.)

- Muskokans, both seasonal and permanent, want this information. Every time we survey our members, a vast majority have said they want information that helps them decide which candidates to support.” We re-emphasize that neither the MLA or Friends are telling people who to vote for. We are identifying the candidates who best align with our values.
- There are no grounds for the MRA to expect the Friends, MLA or other cottage associations to stay neutral at election time. Lake associations are public-interest groups, forwarding the environmental-based agendas of their members. They are not the same as ratepayers’ groups, which are generally expected to avoid favouritism so they can be objective monitors of politicians’ activities. In fact, the Canadian Taxpayers Federation (CTA), in its “[Municipal Ratepayers Guide](#)” for ratepayers’ associations, recommends that RPAs “steer clear of any direct involvement in local politics and remain a non-partisan advocacy group willing to work with whoever is elected to council.” The MRA may or may not follow the CTA’s advice, but their choosing to stay silent at election time should not prevent other organizations with broader missions from expressing their opinions.

The MRA’s criticisms of the MLA/Friends type of election activity included some provocative questions that we are happy to answer. We only wish they had approached us directly with their concerns. Here is our response to three of their more pointed questions.

- *Does a successful (supported) candidate owe anything to the endorsing organization?*

The MLA/Friends have publicly stated that these candidates are aligned only with our visions – not with our organizations. There have never been any conditions, expectations or quid pro quo attached to our identification of aligned candidates.

- *Is there a concern that this will become the “organization’s council” rather than one that is working to benefit the whole community?*

Even if all of our aligned candidates were to be elected, Friends/MLA would have no say in anything they do. They are not a slate or a party; the aligned candidates have made no commitments to each other. We will continue to lobby on important issues, and expect that all councillors will act independently and use their own judgment at all times.

- *Can fair and balanced reporting of that council occur?*

The MLA and MRA both attend TML council meetings and report on those activities. We invite all interested voters to compare this coverage and decide for themselves which is the more complete, detailed and balanced.

October 5, 2018

The MLA/Friends encourage all voters to gather as much information as they can before casting their vote in the October election. Whether or not you agree with our opinions, we urge you to make your voice heard in this campaign, and to exercise your franchise on or before Oct. 22.

For more information on how to vote, visit <https://www.mla.on.ca/Municipal%20Elections%202018> or <http://savemuskoka.ca/election2018/>

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