

Hastings Highlands hears first impressions



Township of Muskoka Lakes Mayor John Furniss was joined by members of his council to outline the economic and geographic similarities between Hastings Highlands and Muskoka Lakes as part of a special meeting of council in Maynooth on Thursday, Nov. 26 at the Hastings Highlands Centre. SARAH VANCE Special to This Week

By Sarah Vance

Hastings Highlands hosted a public, special meeting of council, on Thursday, Nov. 26, to receive insights into first impressions from a community exchange program in which the Municipality of Hastings Highlands has been partnered with the Township of Muskoka Lakes.

"Our council overwhelmingly embraced this activity and this natural partnership with Hastings Highlands," said Mayor Don Furniss, of the Township of Muskoka Lakes. "It was the fastest council resolution we passed all year."

Known as the Cranberry Capital of Ontario, the Township of Muskoka Lakes is a sought-after destination for visitors from around the world, so this partnership is, in itself, an indicator of Hastings Highlands' potential within the tourism and cultural sector.

"We were so excited to learn of our partnership with Hastings Highlands," said Jane Templeton, general manager of the Muskoka Lakes Chamber Commerce and co-ordinator of the Muskoka First Impressions team. "We visited during August and in September and saw a huge potential in this eclectic community that could be described as the Key West of the North."

The First Impressions program, abbreviated as FICE, is a strategy developed by the Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) in which communities are partnered, and during which visiting teams undertake excursions to their exchange community. The objective of these excursions is an assessment of the services, nightlife, curb appeal and overall impressions that a first-time visitor might take away from a community. Using a checklist, visiting teams of six to eight partners then present their findings to their exchange community. Obviously, the host community may wish to make some improvements to the overall impression before the visiting community arrives, so it's a good way to encourage local action. Businesses, for example, may want to look for [Commercial roofing services](#) to have their roof repaired, or councils may want to install hanging baskets and plant flower beds to brighten up the area.

"There are over 200 communities that have participated in this program," said Karen Fischer, agriculture and rural economic development advisor in the regional economic development branch, for Hastings, Lennox and Addington. "It has a value that covers a wide spectrum of communities and it involves positive and constructive feedback."

The Township of Muskoka presented their findings using a slideshow which summarized impressions about entrances; housing and residential areas; educational facilities; health, social and emergency services; downtown activities; industries; tourism; and public infrastructure. This was then consolidated into two summary slides which presented the key strengths and needs of Hastings Highlands.

The Muskoka Lakes team identified factors such as seasonality and a lack of year-round employment as obstacles within Hastings Highlands. They identified an opportunity for guiding and outfitting services to support the recreational visitors on the four seasons,

multi-use trail system. They noted that the curb appeal was not adequate in representing the dynamic products and people to be found inside the local shops and suggested that more signage on the highways might give travellers more reasons to stop and explore.

"We do flourish during the winter months because of the multi-use trail system," said Mayor Vivian Bloom, of Hastings Highlands. "We have parking lots full of snowmobile trailers, from Birds Creek to Maynooth and these visitors form a big part of our winter economy."

The strengths identified by the Muskoka Lakes team included "the funky, eclectic vibe of the town," which Templeton compared to cities like Key West in Florida. She identified warm, welcoming residents and an active, exciting night life. The region was commended for its expansive and active library with its variety of adult and children's programs. A sense of community and local pride was cited as much as the many trails, beautiful landscapes and vast bodies of water.

"When focusing on economic development I tend to focus on incremental gains," said Mayor Furniss of the Muskoka Lakes Township. "These are often achievable outcomes which can be obtained at very minimal costs and collectively, they can bring great gains."

"FICE is part of a projection of items which belong in the economic development spectrum," said Cathy Trimble, business retention and expansion co-ordinator for the Municipality of Hastings Highlands. "This is a structured cost effective process and a good place for us to begin economic development planning, because of the variety of perspectives."

A key takeaway message for the residents of Hastings Highlands might be that there are significant opportunities for those who know and love their community. There is a need, however, for people to step forward and "show off" their community, whether it be hiking treks, boat cruises, hunting excursions or recreational off-road guiding. It would seem that business growth and expansion is right in front of our eyes, and in this case, it will consist of the activities that locals already participate in, so there is no need to reinvent the wheel.

Members of the Hastings Highlands FICE team have planned a reciprocal visit that will occur in Muskoka Lakes on Dec. 10. The public is invited to a follow-up meeting on Jan. 16, from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m., at the Hastings Highlands Centre, at which time discussions between these two communities will continue.