

On the Waterfront: How will our taxes rise?

The following article is excerpted from a speech by Bob Topp, Executive Director of WRAFT, at FOCA Annual Meeting, November 6, 2004

I plan to talk to you today about what's wrong with our property tax system, a bit of Muskoka history because that's where our tax problems began, the formation of WRAFT, what we've accomplished in our first six months, our plans for the critical year ahead and how you can help.

Waterfront Ratepayers After Fair Taxation, affectionately known as WRAFT, was formed in February of this year. It is building a coalition of waterfront associations across Ontario and has a single purpose: to fight for property tax reform in order to halt the ever escalating share of tax being levied on waterfront ratepayers. While WRAFT is relatively new-born, its founders have considerable history and experience in the struggle for a more equitable property tax regime in this province.

A decade ago property owners

on the larger Muskoka lakes began to get hit with a growing share of the tax burden as a result of dramatic assessment increases. While some temporary relief was achieved through group assessment appeals and phase-in of tax increases, it was becoming increasingly clear that we were dealing with a more fundamental issue, the basic system for distributing property taxes.

Continued on page 2...

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

On the Waterfront: How will our taxes rise? 1

Canada Day Fireworks Cancelled—Sort of 1

Salerno Lake Garden Tour—Aug. 13 3

Boat Launch to Close in October 4

To the Memory of Adele Rodger 5

Canada Day Fireworks Cancelled—Sort of

We know that we are living in a litigious age when elementary schools are forced to close playgrounds and the Boy Scouts shut down their wilderness camps because of an inability to obtain insurance coverage. Across the province, many Cottagers' Associations have been struggling to find insurers and the SDLCA is no exception. After much effort our Treasurer, Phil Woodard has found coverage for us but at a premium that is more than twice the previous cost. However even that price the coverage would not include the annual July 1st Fireworks. The premium for that event alone would be at least \$1500. - almost one third of our budget for the year. Although we have enjoyed sponsoring the annual fireworks, we cannot

incur the expenses involved nor can we carry on without any insurance coverage. So it is with great regret that The Executive of the SDLCA must report the cancellation of our July 1st Fireworks Display although we hope that in the future we may find a way to resume the event. (The good news is that the Annual Canoe Race and BBQ will not be adversely affected.)

But all is not lost fellow cottagers! Each of us has liability and property insurance coverage for our cottages, so as individuals we can each hold our own fireworks display. Therefore the SDLCA is proposing that on the evening of Saturday the 2nd of July at 10 pm each of us celebrate Canada Day on Salerno Lake with a large and pronounced BANG! Purchase

some fireworks on your own or pool your efforts with your neighbours. Let's continue to celebrate the birthday of our nation in our own distinctive way.

Just a reminder – if you choose to go out in the boat to fully appreciate the spectacle of the pyrotechnics – please observe all the boating regulations,. Use your running lights to avoid accidents, and be aware of your wake and the effect on smaller craft such as canoes, kayaks etc. Of course, please use the caution when using your own fireworks. That being said, on Saturday July 2nd at 10 pm - let's light up the Salerno sky.

“The average 2003 assessment for built-on properties on water in the township, including big lakes, small lakes and rivers, was \$513,000. The average for built-on properties not on water was \$144,000.”

Continued from page 1...

As waterfront taxes continued to escalate, taxes for properties not on water declined. One can envisage a time in the not too distant future when waterfront properties, which are roughly half of all properties in Muskoka, will be paying 90% of the taxes. In fact if we allow this present tax regime to continue unabated, it will be the end of cottaging as we know it. The idea of keeping the cottage in the family will be history.

Increasingly aware of the growing concern, particularly among seasonal residents, the District of Muskoka in 2001 appointed a task force to examine the property tax regime. I was a member of that task force. We debated long and hard, concluded the system was inequitable and made a number of recommendations to make it fairer. In the fall of 2002, the Council of the District of Muskoka endorsed our report and all its recommendations. The bulk of the recommendations required changes to provincial legislation. Two more years have now gone by and we've had no progress. What has happened is we've had two more assessments and the shift of tax onto those large Muskoka Lakes has continued. Let me illustrate the Muskoka situation by telling you what has happened in the Township of Muskoka Lakes. It is the most extreme example of a tax system gone crazy. The average 2003 assessment for built-on properties on water in the township, including big lakes, small lakes and rivers, was \$513,000. The average for built-on properties not on water was \$144,000. This means that the waterfront properties, which are mostly seasonal, are on average paying three and a half times

as much tax as the non-waterfront. On my lake, Lake Rosseau we're paying six times as much. Of equal concern, the shift of tax onto waterfront is not happening gradually. It's happening in leaps and bounds.

One simple example; my assessment on Lake Rosseau was up 50% last year and my taxes were up 40%. This is the system that's coming your way if its not there already.

Something else became apparent to us late last year. In the last two assessments, in 2001 and 2003, waterfront values were rising all over Muskoka. Also, anecdotally we were learning that the same high waterfront values were increasingly a fact of life in many areas across Ontario. We had earlier established the Muskoka Fair Tax Coalition. With that organization as a base we decided in February of this year to form WRAFT and take our efforts province-wide. While higher taxes are clearly bad news for cottagers all over the province, the good news is, we believe, that by building an Ontario-wide coalition we have a much greater chance of achieving tax reform. It gives us a broader and stronger voice and gets us away from the Muskoka image where, as it is widely perceived, we are all wealthy. It also allowed us, on day one, to approach FOCA who quickly signed on as a founding member, have put Noel Thomas and Terry Rees on our Board and have lent their knowledge, support and broad range of contacts to our cause.

What have we accomplished so far?

Our first challenge was to

agree on the problem. This may sound strange but there is so much wrong with the assessment and property tax system that we had to narrow down the list and establish our number one priority. In doing so we recognized two realities. Realistically we are stuck with some form of assessment process. Also it is not feasible in the present fiscal environment to upload or transfer to the province some costs currently included in property tax. We then concluded that our primary challenge, on behalf of our member associations, was to concentrate on putting a halt to any further shift of tax onto waterfront properties.

Our second priority was to build our coalition. We currently have over 80 member associations spanning the province and the list is literally growing on a daily basis. It ranges from the Lake of the Woods on the west to the Thousand Islands and Rideau Lakes on the east.

Next we wanted to confirm that the shift of tax was in fact a province-wide reality. We've obtained from MPAC statistics by municipality which demonstrate that waterfront properties over the last two assessments are increasing in value at a much greater rate than those not on waterfront. The listings by township will be handed out at the WRAFT annual meeting.

To begin our lobbying efforts, we've had introductory meetings with Ontario politicians and bureaucrats involved in property tax policy, we've described the issues as we see them and we've made it clear that we're not going away.

Continued on page 3...

Salerno Lake Garden Tour—Aug. 13

Gardening is active living - the second most popular physical activity in Canada, and offers the opportunity for lifelong participation. More over gardening can be a positive contributor to the natural environment.

How can I tell if a plant is native? Not all plants that grow in the wild are native. Some plants, such as Queen Anne's lace, we may think of as native, simply because they're so common in wild places, but they are in fact introduced (also known as "alien") plants. Although it may sound as if you need a botany degree to determine which plants are native, you don't! But you do need a good field guide such as Peterson's or Audubon's (check your local library or a bookstore). Or join a local naturalist's club. Talk with fellow gardeners or contact a local native plant nursery. Visit a nearby arboretum, nature centre or botanical garden. And go for walks in local, undisturbed natural places, such as conservation areas and provincial parks--you'll find all the inspiration you need to get started on your own native plant gardening adventure!

One of the most positive gardening trends over the last few years--along with the growing commitment of gardeners to organic practices--has been the increased interest in native plant gardening. People across Canada are looking to the natu-

ral landscapes of woodlands, meadows, prairies and wetlands for inspiration in their gardens, recreating back and front yard habitats that are based on models found in nature.

Continued on page 5...



Remember to buy fireworks for July 2nd

Continued from page 2...

In order to communicate our progress to members, we've developed what we believe is an effective website, www.wraft.com. We will update it regularly and encourage you to look at it frequently.

To build a war chest, we've carried out a successful fundraising in Muskoka, bringing in over \$100,000. This is particularly heartening as it says that a lot of folks believe in our mission. We'll be talking to our members later about helping to build our war chest.

Finally, we've begun a research project designed to identify precedents in North America for property tax reform and in particular for methodologies which move away from a pure assessment-based approach, as we have in Ontario, for distributing taxes.

In the May 2004 Ontario budget, the Liberals first and now infamous budget, there was a bit of good news for cottagers. The next assessment was deferred from 2004 to 2005. More importantly, language in the budget indicated an awareness of the

concern with inequities in the current system. The budget stated that before the end of 2005, research will be carried out to "address taxpayers concerns with assessment volatility for individual properties" and "ensure fairness for all property owners....". There was no specific reference to waterfront but from meetings we have held already with the province we think that they recognize our concerns and we have indicated we will be researching precedents and providing input to their deliberations over the coming months. Let me tell you though that it's going to be an uphill battle. The bureaucrats think the present methodology is fair. The winners under the system, those in your municipality not on water, think its just fine. Municipalities like it because it makes it easy, unless we watch closely, to raise more taxes without jacking up the millrate. (This happened a few years ago in my own township, Seguin, where we've since had a major change in our elected council. I don't know what your experience has been but it appears that many townships are taking advantage of higher assessments to raise their total tax take.) With many supporting the status quo, we

need the strongest possible voice and the best possible research and precedents to accomplish our objectives.

Let me close by saying that, while it may seem obvious to many of you, we spent some time early on agreeing on what was inequitable about the present pure assessment-based system for distributing property taxes in Ontario. It bears no relationship to ability to pay. It bears absolutely no relationship to services provided. It is volatile and unpredictable. It creates financial hardship for many waterfront residents. It is a tax on an unrealized gain and it is now forcing the sale of properties, leading to an acceleration of development on the waterfront. We already know that many other jurisdictions have modified their systems to deal with these inequities. We are dedicated at WRAFT to finding a better way in Ontario. We hope, if you haven't already, you will join us.

Editor's Note – As of December 2004, the SDLCA has joined WRAFT and Mr. Bill Proctor has agreed to be our representative.

Boat Launch to Close in October 2005

The following is correspondence between myself and Laura Cunliffe, Administrative Assistant for the Township of Minden Hills.

I am President of the Salerno (Devil's Lake) Cottagers' Association on

Salerno Lake near Irondale. Approximately one half of the cottage properties on our lake are within the Township of Minden Hills and the rest are within the Municipality of Highlands East.

In a recent conversation with Mr. Andy Van Hoof, I learned of his intention to develop the property at the west end of the lake which encompasses the only Boat Launch on the lake. This access has been in use for many years but most of us were aware that it would eventually be built upon. Mr Van Hoof plans to close the Boat Launch area to the public by Thanksgiving of this year in order to begin construction. I am given to understand that he has a building permit for this property and that in obtaining this, he had given to the Municipality approximately 400

feet of shoreline to the west of the existing for the purposes of building a new access and Boat Launch. I am also led to believe that Minden Hills agreed to construct this new public lake access.

There are more than a few obstacles to this construction because the shoreline is shallow and rocky and will need to be dredged to make it navigable. In addition a road will need to be constructed and sufficient area cleared to allow for trailers, turn-arounds etc.

We feel that it is crucial that this process begin as soon as possible. Has the Municipality of Minden Hills made any plans or assessments in this regard? How many levels of government will have to be involved in order for the project to proceed?

I would appreciate hearing from you on this matter and trust that you will forward this request to Reeve Rigney and Ward 3 Councillor Mr Buchanan. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,
Douglas Rodger

Mr. Rodger, I have had an opportunity to speak with Fraser MacDonald (Building By-law Manager). This matter has apparently been going on since before amalgamation and Fraser has explained some of it for me. Land has been transferred from Van Hoof to the Township of Minden Hills securing an area for the possibility of a boat launch area to be installed.

We have noted there is an area of Township land with access to the lake, but until we finish review of the file, we are unable to comment as to how Council wishes to deal with this. A report will be going to Council for their June 30th Council meeting and once Council has dealt with this matter, we can advise you further. Thank you for your patience and if you have any further questions after the Council meeting, please do not hesitate to contact Fraser MacDonald, our CBO, at 705 286 1260 ext. 208.

All the best, Laura Cunliffe.

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Salerno Lake Garden Tour—Aug. 13



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dening trends over the last few years--along with the growing commitment of gardeners to organic practices--has been the increased interest in native plant gardening. People across Canada are looking to the natural landscapes of woodlands, meadows, prairies and

wetlands for inspiration in their gardens, recreating back and front yard habitats that are based on models found in nature.

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To the Memory of Adele Rodger

I beg your indulgence if the following article seems to be rather personal but there is I believe, good reason for me to use this forum to discuss something so painful. This summer finds me in a melancholy state as once again cancer strikes at my family taking from us, my dear sister Adele, decades before her time. As I write this, the end is inevitable but we live with her day by day.

During her struggles over the last months one hope that sustained us was that Adele might have sufficient reprieve from the disease that she could come to the cottage and be well enough to swim and relax by the water in much the same way that we did as children growing up near Burks Falls. Alas, our last vacation was not to be but we did manage a winter weekend in February between her chemotherapy sessions and it was truly magical.

As Adele and I talk about our lives, time and again our memories take us back to golden summers spent at Deer Lake in the cottage that our parents built by hand and where we lived from the last day of school until Labour Day. There were seven children, myself the only boy, and six girls. My Scottish grandfather (whom we called Bumpa) was there too, putting his fine carpentry skills to good use and rising every morning for a swim at dawn no matter what the weather. My father Archie, an OPP sergeant at the time, would commute 10 miles to the detachment office every day. This wasn't too great a hardship as rush hour in Burks Falls consisted of a hay wagon on Ontario Street. My mother, managed to keep this sprawling household running happily without running water, indoor plumbing or electricity in the early years. I am happy to relate that Memere is now a vigorous eighty-three year old who enjoys visiting with us on Salerno Lake, despite the steep terrain.

In these recollections, Adele and I are like so many of you – the cottage is the place where many of the best things in our lives came about. The cottage is where our family bonds were forged and it is part of the legacy we hope to leave for our children. Now for all the grandchildren in the Rodger family, Salerno Lake has become the lake of dreams, the special place where every moment holds the promise of happiness and excitement.

My youngest sister Denyse succumbed to the same awful disease five years ago, leaving behind her husband David and two young sons. Now Luke and Connor stay with us every summer. They have made friends on the lake and consider the Canoe Race and BBQ to be a highlight of their summer. Our cottage has become their cottage and that is how it should be. Sharing is what makes a cottage so incredibly special. My wife Barbara was raised in Alberta where cottages are uncommon. When we first married she did not understand my obsession with a place by a lake. One week at a cottage was all it took to convert her. Even the Moonies take longer than that!

Adele's son Drew and daughter Haley have also been regulars doing all the things that teenagers will do on a lake in summer. When they begin to raise their own families, Barbara and I hope to see their children down on the dock. As for grandchildren of our own, well don't get me started.

Douglas Rodger

Gardening... from previous page.

The environmental reasons for gardening with native plants are positive and compelling. Native plant gardens:

- increase biodiversity;
- provide habitat for a wide variety of creatures such as birds and butterflies;
- provide a home for many native plants that are becoming increasingly rare in the wild;
- conserve water;
- and eliminate the need for

chemical inputs such as pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers.

Just as important to gardeners are the practical and aesthetic benefits of native plant gardening: less work and lots of beauty! You'll quickly discover that native plant gardens almost look after themselves--after all, that's what happens in nature, and native plant gardens are based on natural principles.

Whether you want your garden to be a shady woodland retreat, a sunny meadow of swaying grasses and wildflowers, or a calming pond, the principles of native plant gardening are the same. The key is that your source of inspiration for the garden is nature:

you're working with her, using plants that would grow naturally in your area, recycling nutrients in the soil by composting, conserving moisture by mulching, grouping plants with similar needs together, and using a wide variety of species.

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www.salernolake.ca



SalernoLake.ca is the official website of the SDLCA. Currently we have detailed maps of the lake properties, pictures, articles, and other interesting pieces of information. You can also pay your membership dues, or buy an e-mail address (yourname@salernolake.ca).

If you have an idea for the website, or if you think you can help make it better, please let us know!

You can contact

Eric Brown: webmaster@salernolake.ca

Douglas Rodger: elpresidente@salernolake.ca


Salerno Lake Garden Tour—Aug. 13

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One of the initiatives that I would like to see on Salerno Lake is a garden tour – an opportunity for like-minded people to share their love of plants and gardening. The idea is that we spend an afternoon dropping by various gardens around the lake then convene for a late tea. A tentative date has been suggested – Saturday August 13th. We might charge a nominal amount to cover any costs or even raise a few bucks for the Association but the most important aspect is to meet others and learn more about the challenges of gardening in our region. We have to work out the logistics but the first order of business is to let me know if you are

interested. Please contact me at 705 447 2896 – you can leave a message or email me at

elpresidente@salernolake.ca



"Call it what you will: natural landscaping, mini-ecological gardening, wildflower gardening, natural gardening, low-maintenance landscaping or natural heritage gardening... The terms are less important than the changes they encompass--a movement away from the manicured look, from the fussy, high-maintenance and expensive flowerbeds towards a more unfettered, dynamic natural plant system."
--Robert S. Dorney and Douglas H. Allen, in *The Harrowsmith Landscaping Handbook*