

Town of Huntsville Official Plan Review - POLICY BACKGROUND PAPER

Natural & Human Hazards/Constraints – Wildland Fires

BACKGROUND:

- The province identifies that after flooding, wildland fires (forest fires) are the second most common natural disaster. In addition, 90% of wildland fires are human caused and located within three (3) kilometres of communities.
- Likely being cognizant of the impacts of the 2011 Slave Lake fire in northern Alberta, as well as the Timmins, Ontario, fire in 2012, the Province included a wildland fire policy (3.1.8) in the Natural Hazards section of the 2014 PPS. This was the first time such a policy was included in this document.
- When communities expand into forested areas, the Province indicates that the manner in which development occurs can increase the level of risk to human life and the values associated with wildland fires. It is particularly severe where hazardous forest composition and conditions exist. These include high concentrations of coniferous trees in forests or stands, vegetation that has sustained storm, insect or disease damage, and/or areas with abundant understory vegetation and ground fuel accumulation.
- The level of risk with this issue is anticipated to increase with advent of climate change.
- Within approximately one month of the Fort McMurray fires occurring in north eastern Alberta, the province requested stakeholder comments on a new document prepared by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNRF) entitled "[Wildland Fire Risk Assessment and Mitigation: A Guidebook in support of the Provincial Policy Statement, 2014 – DRAFT](#)" through a posting on the Environmental Registry. This guidebook contains Provincial wildland fire assessment and mitigation standards recommended for use by municipalities to ensure planning decisions are consistent with the PPS.
- Recognizing that land use planning is a critical part of their framework for managing emergencies, the province, through this guidebook, indicates that to reduce the wildland fire risk and ensure consistency with the PPS, official plan policy will need to recognize wildland fire hazards and require assessments and where necessary, incorporation of mitigation measures on neighbourhood or site basis.

POLICY CONTEXT:

Provincial Policy Statement (2014):

- 3.1.3 Planning authorities shall consider the potential impacts of climate change that may increase the risk associated with natural hazards.
- 3.1.8 *Development* shall generally be directed to areas outside of lands that are unsafe for development due to the presence of *hazardous forest types for wildland fire*.

Development may however be permitted in lands with hazardous forest types for wildland fire where the risk is mitigated in accordance with *wildland fire assessment and mitigation standards*.

Current Muskoka Official Plan & Policy Directions Report:

At present the Muskoka Official Plan does not contain policies respecting wildland fires.

First Draft - Muskoka Official Plan:

- H1.2 **Development** shall generally be directed to areas outside of:
- b) Hazardous lands adjacent to river, stream and small inland lake systems which are impacted by flooding hazards and/or erosion hazards or areas at risk for **wildland fire**;
- H1.8 a) **Development** shall generally be directed to areas outside of lands that are unsafe for **development** due to the presence of **hazardous forest types** for wildland fire.
- b) **Development** may be permitted in lands with hazardous forests types for wildland fire where the risk is mitigated in accordance with **wildland fire assessment and mitigation standards**.
 - c) The District and/or Area Municipalities may request an assessment undertaken by a qualified professional during the appropriate time of year and using accepted protocols to determine the **wildland fire** risk and required mitigation measures where development is proposed in areas identified as Extreme, High and Needs Evaluation identified on Appendix _____.

Town Strategic Documents:

Strategic Plan

Natural Environment and Sustainability

Goal #1: Demonstrate the Town's commitment to protecting the quality and character of the natural environment.

Goal #2: Integrate sustainability principles into planning and development policies and processes.

Unity Plan

Goal #1 Environment: The community will protect, preserve, restore and enhance the terrestrial and aquatic environments and biodiversity of Huntsville and surrounding area by being responsible stewards of the environment.

Goal #5 Land Use Planning: Huntsville will become a model of sustainable community development, by incorporating the principles of smart growth, sustainable design and green buildings into all land use planning decisions. This will include a commitment to the protection and maintenance of Huntsville’s rural small town character and vibrant downtown, both of which are valued by the community.

Huntsville Official Plan:

At present the Official Plan does not contain policies respecting wildland fires.

CONSIDERATIONS:

- To assist with official plan policy preparation, the guidebook is accompanied by a very coarse level of mapping which identifies potential wildland fire hazard forest areas. Appendix I contains the mapping for the Town. This broad level mapping does not confirm or exclude the presence of hazardous forest types, but may be used as a starting point and consideration be given to the completion of a municipal-wide wildland fire assessment. The province suggests that such an assessment could be based on Fire Smart mapping (i.e. a program delivered through a partnership between the Partners in Protection, a national non-profit agency focused on training and fire risk education, and municipalities). The Fire Chief has confirmed that this mapping has not been prepared for the Town. There would be an expense to prepare such mapping and until it has been prepared, the Town would need to rely on Appendix I as an initial screening tool for this purpose.
- In the absence of detailed municipal-wide mapping, the approach to confirm wildland fire risk would be the completion of proponent-driven and peer-reviewed, sitespecific assessments. Development could proceed with appropriate mitigation, provided that significant natural heritage features or functions are not impacted, or directed away from areas of high to very high risk.
- The province is suggesting that such site-specific assessments be required for all types of planning applications. Additionally, it is being recommended that long-term monitoring of mitigation measures be put in place because of the dynamic nature of forest ecosystems.
- The Provincial Implementation Guidebook noted above, has not yet been approved.
- As most growth would be directed to the Urban Settlement Area and Communities, this new requirement generally applies to rural lot creation and development. Given the forested landscape and nature of development in the Town, a number of development proposals will likely be required to undergo an assessment to demonstrate consistency with the PPS under the proposed guidelines. Another consideration involves identification of qualified professionals to undertake assessments and recommend related mitigation measures.
- The inclusion of wildland fire policies in an updated official plan is required.

SUMMARY:

A review of best practices from other municipalities across the province has revealed that the following policy approaches may assist in addressing some of the considerations:

- The screening mapping provided by the province should be used until more detailed mapping is prepared. With this approach, the policies would need to require the completion of proponent-driven site-specific assessments for new lot creation and other development.
- Where extensive vegetation removal is required, the policies would need to ensure that a biological assessment to ensure that Endangered and Threatened Species, as well as Significant Wildlife Habitat, is not being impacted.
- In order to ensure that a dwelling or other use can be located on a lot which is in an area identified as having a wildland fire risk, sufficient lot area will be required. This may mean larger lot area and frontage requirements.
- Recognizing that climate change will influence the wildland fire risk, the development of official plan policies that ensure, where possible, multiple access points to major development in Communities for emergency access; improved road connectivity; and impose increased development setbacks from the wildland-development interface should be entertained.