

Muskoka residents – year-round and cottagers – stronger together

Call for unity as communities aim to overcome fear, blame and division caused by coronavirus crisis

COMMUNITY Jun 11, 2020 by [Alison Brownlee](#) Huntsville Forester



Collin Reaney says a community that works together without division accomplishes incredible feats, such as the establishment of the Dorset Community Health Hub. June 9, 2020. - Rob Stimpson Photography
HUNTSVILLE-LAKE OF BAYS — Collin Reaney knows the power of a united community.

"Vibrant communities are really important, and they grow together. There are not boundaries or turf wars like townships, towns and districts," said [the Lake of Bays resident](#). "When community engagement happens, jurisdictions and politics don't matter. What matters is working together."

But the COVID-19 crisis seemed to have fractured the community with fear of the virus sparking tension between year-round and seasonal residents.

Now many were worried about the long-term implications of that tension, especially when collaborative effort remained crucial to community, economic vitality and health-care services.



(Collin Reaney says a community that works together without division accomplishes incredible feats, such as the establishment of the Dorset Community Health Hub. — Rob Stimpson Photography photo)

STRONGER TOGETHER:

Reaney, a former seasonal turned year-round resident, continued to tout the importance of community collaboration between all residents because each depended on the other.

And he said he, personally, made no distinctions.

"It's not about where we're from," he said. "It's all about what we do."

And he, as a board member for the [Dorset Community Partnership Fund](#), project facilitator for the [Dorset Community Health Hub](#), board member for the SS Bigwin and board member for the Huntsville Hospital Foundation, had seen the community accomplish much.

The list, he said, included the SS Bigwin restoration, establishment of the health hub for rural primary care, construction of a children's playground and community pavilion, substantial fundraisers for the Huntsville hospital, support for the Lake of Bays Public Library and more.

All the initiatives, he said, were community led.

But since the crisis started, he said, some seasonal residents had felt unwelcome and started to question whether their contributions as community members were appreciated.

"I have people who are extremely upset," he said. "And what that tells me (is that) they feel blamed and they feel fear."

He said he didn't like the idea of blame or stigma.

Instead, he said, he wanted to focus on the good that can come from working together.

And he noted collaboration in the COVID-19 crisis remained vital, as primary and acute health-care needs would only increase.

Health hub team members, he said, continued to offer wellness checks by phone, and donors had helped fund those services, and purchase personal protective equipment and cleaning materials, while also supporting food programs and pharmacy support programs facilitated in partnership with the charity, businesses and service clubs during the crisis.

Demand for these programs, he noted, would likely continue indefinitely.

Plus, investments in virtual primary care infrastructure, technology and training were on the horizon, as the crisis transformed health-care delivery.

And access to acute hospital care remained vital, too.

More donations — and collaboration — would be necessary, especially as the COVID-19 crisis hampered, postponed or cancelled annual fundraising events.

Reaney added that he hoped everyone could move past their fear, remember the importance of community and share their appreciation of their neighbours in this time of need.

"If I've learned anything, it's that everyone loves this community and cares about it," he said. "And they want to be an appreciated part of it."



(Don Tapscott says collaboration on community initiatives, such as the restoration of the SS Bigwin, is vital to vibrant communities. — Don Tapscott photo)

A SEASONAL RESIDENT'S PERSPECTIVE:

Don Tapscott, a resident of Lake of Bays, noted he and other seasonal residents, whether as donors, volunteers or event facilitators, had long collaborated with their year-round neighbours toward a vibrant community to the benefit of all.

"We do it because we love the community," he said. "A number of the cottagers are quite deeply hurt and offended that some people would somehow think we're not welcome in our own community."

Tapscott, a member of several community organizations as well as a contributor to the Dorset Health Hub, [SS Bigwin](#), Huntsville Hospital Foundation and more, said he worried some of the division was politically motivated, but noted most was likely driven by misinformation and fear.

"Fear gets in the way of a lot of things, including good relationships, and building a successful, economically viable and harmonious community," he said. "But the fear is not founded on anything real."

He argued seasonal residents, in general, were as concerned about their safety and the safety of their community as year-round residents. And he noted he continued to feel welcomed by his neighbours, especially those he and his family knew personally.

"This is not an 'us versus them' situation, as far as I'm concerned," he said.

Tapscott said he planned to continue to support the community, including contributions to the Huntsville Hospital Foundation, despite the tension created by fear rhetoric.

"It's a worthy cause. The fact that there may be some misinformed people saying things that may be hurtful to cottagers has nothing to do with my decision," he said. "And I do it because it's the right thing to do; I'm part of this community."

He reiterated collaboration was vital.

"Cottagers have a great experience when there is a vibrant, successful local community and the local community benefits when it has engaged seasonal residents as well," he said. "Dorset is Exhibit A for that."

Many businesses, too, have joined the call for an end to any perceived hostilities.



(Randy Mitson, marketing director for Algonquin Outfitters, says a strong summer season is vital to many businesses in Muskoka. — Algonquin Outfitters photo)

MISUNDERSTANDINGS AND A NEED TO SAVE SUMMER:

Randy Mitson, marketing director for [Algonquin Outfitters](#), argued part of the issue seemed to be that seasonal residents and visitors misconstrued businesses' reiteration of provincial and public health direction as company stance in the early days of the crisis.

"We had one customer that commented on a post saying, 'Well, if you don't want me coming to Muskoka from Toronto, then I just will never shop with you again,'" said Mitson. "I'm not telling you, personally, that you can't come. The government said to everybody that they should not be travelling around the province. So, I think there was a little bit of misunderstanding."

He noted the patronage of year-round and seasonal residents as well as visitors and tourists allowed the company to not only operate 12 months a year, but also support vital humanitarian causes in the area, including the [Huntsville Hospital Foundation as a sponsor of the Business Cares initiative](#), toward a more vibrant and secure community.

"Something like our hospital is used by everybody. It's not only locals. If you're in the area and you have a cottage or you're visiting and something happens, they're there to help," said Mitson.

He added the COVID-19 public health crisis was like nothing the business had ever experienced.

Never before had it experienced a two-month closure, he said.

The company's shop in Huntsville, he said, had since reopened May 19, but staff put strict COVID-19 prevention measures in place, including physical distancing requirements, protective barriers, masks for staff, a hand sanitizer station and limits on how many customers were in the shop at a time.

He commented that, from his perspective, most people were taking the necessary steps to protect themselves and others, which would only benefit the community as a whole.

The ultimate goal, he said, was to take the precautions necessary to save the summer season for residents, visitors and businesses alike.

"Our business isn't the same every month. It's very summer heavy. Eighty per cent of our business is in the summer," he said.

Other businesses operated in the summer only, which made the season even more vital.

And a mix of customers, whether year-round and seasonal residents or visitors, were necessary for all, he said.

A CALL FOR UNITY:

Political leaders continued to call for unity and collaboration, too.

Area mayors and the District of Muskoka chair [jointly penned an open letter in May](#) that called for an end of 'us versus them' rhetoric amid the pandemic.

"Let us remind ourselves that all our residents — both year-round and seasonal — are valued and recognize that we share a long tradition of coming together to support one another," stated the letter.

The authors warned against divisive attitudes.

"That type of behaviour is counterintuitive to our Canadian values and falls far short of reflecting the sentiment of the vast majority of Muskoka residents," stated the letter.

Terry Glover, mayor for Lake of Bays, told this newspaper he, personally, had never made a distinction between year-round and seasonal residents.

"I've always said, 'We're all in this together,'" said Glover. "And I'm still saying it."

He said it was clear everyone was after the same thing — safety for themselves and their family.

"And they're angry at the virus. They're not angry at each other," he said. "But it's the only way they can express it."

He acknowledged that frustration in these difficult times was only human.

"But you always have to do your checks and balances, and make sure you're directing your comments the way they should be directed," he said. "Everybody is nervous, scared and frustrated and out of sorts. We've got to work together."

Karin Terziano, mayor for Huntsville, blamed fear for divisiveness, as she, personally, made no distinction between year-round and seasonal residents.

"Seasonal residents are residents," she said. "We need to treat everyone equally."

She said she was worried fear would rise once more as the economy reopened in Huntsville and Ontario, but she argued support for local businesses was important, too.

"There is a good deal of the business community that feels we have to open because we have to make some money," she said. "We have to eat."

She added it was important for the community to pull together for recovery.

"This virus is going to (become a distant memory) someday, and we want to be the community we've always been, a community that cares about one another," she said. "We're not a divided community."



(Katherine Craine, executive director for the Huntsville Hospital Foundation, says donations to the hospital will be vital as COVID-19 hampers fundraisers and events in 2020. — Torstar file photo)

A WORD FROM THE HOSPITAL AND FOUNDATION:

Officials for Huntsville District Memorial Hospital had noted through the crisis that the added strain caused by the pandemic had placed additional pressure on hospitals across Ontario.

Natalie Bubela, chief executive officer for Muskoka Algonquin Healthcare, noted in a statement issued April 3 that those pressures made everyone's adherence to provincial and public health directives critical in order to slow the spread of the virus and avoid overburdening the health-care system.

But the hospital, its staff and physicians, she said, were poised to respond and would serve all those who needed it.

"Muskoka Algonquin Healthcare will always serve whoever comes through our doors, to the best of our ability, whether they live here 12 months of the year, operate a business, cottage here or are visiting from another region," said Bubela. "We all like to call Muskoka home and we are all in this together."

She, too, called for unity.

"More than ever, we must be kind, stop drawing lines, and support and respect each other," she said. "Our hospital foundations are blessed by the generosity of numerous donors, seasonal residents too, who make hospital care better for everyone here."

The [Huntsville Hospital Foundation](#) aims to raise \$3 million, annually, for the hospital to support equipment and technology purchases and replacements, which are not funded by the province.

Katherine Craine, executive director for the foundation, said the hospital, staff, physicians and community valued the contributions made by donors toward health care for life, here.

Postponement or cancellation of seasonal events and fundraisers because of the COVID-19 crisis would only increase the need for individual and business donations, she said.

Seasonal events usually raise half a million dollars.

"We have an annual commitment to purchase equipment for the hospital. All items are priority needs of technology or equipment that are vital to the care of our patients," said Craine. "If our revenue is down, we will have to limit the amount of funds to the hospital to purchase this equipment."

She noted the COVID-19 crisis had led to unanticipated additions to the foundation's commitment list, including new ICU beds, ventilators and feeding pumps, too.

Craine thanked the foundation's donors and acknowledged the difficult economic climate cause by the crisis.

"If there are those who can still support the hospital, we really appreciate it, as we will be depending on individual and business donations for the foreseeable future and not relying on our events," she said.

She added the foundation depended on the combined effort and generosity of the entire community, which included year-round and seasonal residents, to meet its commitments to the hospital.

"Huntsville hospital is able to provide excellent health care because we work together," she said. "Everyone wins when we work together. We have so much to be grateful for, and want to say thank you so much."

STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Community leaders reached out to us as concerns that division, bred by fear in COVID-19, would hurt the recovery and create long-term detrimental effects when it came to vital infrastructure, like the hospital, that served the entire community. We reached out to residents, businesses, elected officials and the hospital foundation for their perspectives, in an effort to share a message: we're stronger together.



by [Alison Brownlee](#)

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