Planning Justification Reports and Briefs/Letters

The purpose of this document is to provide terms of reference for the preparation of a planning justification report, which may be required as part of the submission of an application for Official Plan Amendment, Zoning By-law Amendment/Community Planning Permit, Draft Plan of Subdivision/Condominium, Site Plan, Consent and Minor Variance.

A Planning Justification Report provides information to understand the proposed development; to demonstrate how it is consistent or conforms to applicable provincial, district and area municipal requirements and the planning rationale for a proposed development.

This document is intended to help the applicant organize and substantiate the application and to assist staff in the review of the proposal.

Depending on the complexity of the application, the information requirements may be addressed in a letter format or a more comprehensive report.

Required by Legislation

The Ontario Planning Act, the Provincial Planning Statement, the District of Muskoka Official Plan and Area Municipal Official Plans.

Who should prepare this letter/report?

A Planning Justification Report is prepared and signed by an independent Registered Professional Planner (RPP).

Why do we need this letter/report?

A Planning Justification Report is report or letter is required to:

- Provide a clear understanding of the proposal
- Highlight information specific or particular to the proposal (i.e., special history or circumstances)
- Demonstrate good planning and how the proposal is consistent with the Provincial Planning Statement; conforms to Provincial Plans, District of Muskoka Official Plan, Area Official Plan and any other guidelines or requirements

How should this letter/report be prepared?

A Planning Justification Report should at a minimum contain:

Introduction

- Address of the subject property
- General site location of the subject property and context map
- Project Name (if applicable)
- Applicant and owner's contact information
- Author name, title, qualifications, company name and appropriate stamp
- Brief description of the proposal
- Overview of the study area
- Purpose of the study
- Listing of documents relied upon to prepare the Planning Justification Report (i.e. studies undertaken by other disciplines such as an environmental impact study, natural heritage evaluation, archaeological study, functional services study, etc.
- How the Planning Justification Report addresses matters arising from the voluntary/strongly encourage pre-consultation phase

Proposal Description and Context

- A description of the proposal, development stats (such as number of units, site area) type of development proposed, height, FSI, parking areas, access points, location of amenity areas, proposed phasing)
- In the case of a District or Area Official Plan Amendment(s), it is important to provide a clear justification for why the amendment to the Plan(s) is required at this time, given that these plans are reviewed on a regular basis with the intention of updating them to conform with/be consistent with Provincial policies and regulations. As such, a thorough explanation is required with a clear demonstration as to how the proposed Official Plan will benefit the community wherein the amendment would apply, the municipality and the District
- Planning history of the site, such as previous approvals, legislative references, Ontario Land Tribunal history, relevant authorities (i.e., site plan agreements, site-specific zoning by-law, community planning permits and variances) including copies of relevant documents
- Process step/approvals required (i.e. zoning, community planning permit, site plan, consent, subdivision, condominium)
- A description of the existing on-site conditions as well as surrounding areas, roads, natural areas, buildings, parking areas
- A list detailing the potential amendments to the Official Plan and/or Zoning By-law / Community Planning Permit, or a draft Official Plan amendment and/or Zoning By-law amendment/ Community Planning Permit amendment in the municipality's format, if applicable
- Concept/Site plan for the development including building location, parking, access, amenity areas, grading, natural features and hazards

- A description of the location and existing condition of the subject lands including buildings, structures, any natural features, heritage resources, potential for contamination or site constraints
- A description of the surrounding land uses. If used for a business, state the name and the nature of the business and any significant features such as: roads, natural features, buildings and parking areas
- Listing of documents relied upon to prepare the Planning Justification Report (i.e. studies undertaken by other disciplines such as an environmental impact study, natural heritage evaluation, archaeological study, functional services study, etc.
- Other concurrent approvals being sought, planning applications, permits

Investigation/Evaluation

- How the proposal is consistent with the Provincial Planning Statement (PPS), and conforms to all Provincial Plans and Planning Act considerations
- How it meets relevant District and Area Official Plan policies including discussion as to how and why each is addressed by the proposal or identify where the proposal does not comply with District and Area Official Plan policies and why the proposed amendments are necessary, if applicable
- Overview of relevant Official Plan and Zoning By-law / Community Planning Precinct information, areas of compliance and non-compliance and why any proposed amendments are necessary
- Discussion of how the proposal will address any other relevant municipal planning studies or guidelines
- Where appropriate the investigation/evaluation should reference related studies prepared in support the development application in order to provide a fulsome/comprehensive analysis of the application

Impacts and Mitigation Measures

- Analysis and opinion as to why the proposal is considered appropriate, including issues of impact and compatibility

Recommendations

- Summary and conclusions of the supporting studies and how they support the development and any special considerations or conditions that should be imposed
- Any recommendations, or conditions that should form part of a decision on the matter

Drawings and Supporting Information

- Provide an outline of the supporting studies submitted (i.e., environmental impact study, natural heritage evaluation, archaeological study, functional services study, etc.)

Community Engagement

- Provide a summary of any formal or informal community meetings held prior to the submission of the application and the feedback received
- Provide a summary of any additional engagement that is planned as part of the proposal

A planning justification brief/letter should contain:

- A description of the proposal, overview, major statistics (i.e., height, density, parking), relevant phasing issues, site and contextual considerations
- A site description and surrounding land uses/context/built form
- The site's planning history such as previous approvals, legislative references, Ontario Land Tribunal history, relevant authorities (i.e., site plan agreements, site-specific zoning by-law / community planning permits, heritage designation by-laws, severance and minor variances currently or recently in process, with copies of relevant documents)
- Where appropriate the investigation/evaluation should reference related studies prepared in support the development application in order to provide a fulsome/comprehensive analysis of the application

Special considerations for plans of condominiums

In addition, the planning justification letter for draft plan of subdivision or condominium description applications may provide a description of the type of application (i.e., common elements, phased, vacant land, standard) and provide information on any related planning approval processes or any unusual circumstances. If there was no previous planning process including site plan approval, the letter should explain the circumstances.

What else should we know?

The scope of the study should be discussed with the district and/or area municipal planning staff and or other staff or agencies as part of the consultation process.

It is important that the study not be finalized until the results of all other studies are completed such, but not limited to, an environmental impact study, natural heritage evaluation, archaeological study, functional services study, etc.

Additional Terms

To be identified by the District and/or Area Municipality where proposed development is located.

Study Submission Instructions

To be identified by the District and/or Area Municipality where proposed development is located.

What other resources are there?

Ontario Professional Planners Institute (OPPI) – Hire an RPP
Ontario Planning Act, R.S.O. 1990
Provincial Planning Statement 2024 (PPS)
Muskoka Official Plan (MOP)
Applicable Area Municipal Official Plans:
Town of Huntsville Official Plan
Town of Bracebridge Official Plan
Town of Gravenhurst Official Plan
Township of Lake of Bays Official Plan
Township of Muskoka Lakes Official Plan
Township of Georgian Bay Official Plan

About these Terms of Reference

The need and scope for this study will be decided by the District and/or Area Municipality during initial pre-consultation process with input from partner agencies. This pre-consultation process may include:

- Determination if this study is applicable
- Confirmation of criteria within these Terms of Reference that are appropriate for your development project
- Identification of specific technical components that need to be addressed
- Identification of detailed standards to be met

Notes:

If the proposed development is revised, the study/report shall reflect the revisions by an updated report or letter from the author indicating the changes and whether or not the recommendations and conclusions are the same (Note: this is subject to the extent of the revisions).

A peer review may be required. The cost of the peer review will be borne by the applicant.

If the submitted study is incomplete, is authored by an unqualified individual or does not contain adequate analysis, the applications will be considered incomplete and returned to the applicant.