



Macdonald, Meredith, and Aberdeen Additional Strategic Plan Engagement Summary

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1.0 Background

The Township of Macdonald, Meredith & Aberdeen Additional (MMAA) retained J. L. Richards & Associates Ltd. (JLR) to develop a strategic plan to guide Council and staff decision making for the coming five-year period. This project provides Council and staff with a fresh opportunity to engage with the community, establish a shared vision and goals, and align around specific actions for implementation.

1.1 What is Strategic Planning?

Strategic planning is a process through which a municipality can look ahead to the future and work proactively to ensure that Council, staff, and community stakeholders are working toward common goals. The process allows Council the opportunity to set priorities, focus staff and financial resources, assess and adjust practices where needed, and monitor successes over time. Strategic Planning similarly offers an opportunity for members of the community to participate in setting and achieving desired outcomes for the Township.

A strategic plan, once adopted by Council, will provide goals, objectives, and themes to assist Council to make consistent decisions to guide the direction of the Township. It also stands as a reminder of the commitment of Council and staff to the community's goals and vision.

1.2 MMAA's Strategic Planning Project

To develop the strategic plan, the project scope includes the following:

- Understanding the "current state" of the township and the community's desires for the future;
- Setting a long-term vision for the future of the Township;
- Setting a common mission that reflect Council's purpose for the Township;
- Setting the priorities (goals) of the public, staff, and Council for MMAA over the coming five years, and longer term;
- Identifying barriers the Township may face and opportunities to leverage to carry out goals and work towards the vision; and
- Establishing methods to monitor and report publicly on the progress of the strategic plan, once adopted.

To initiate the project, a kick-off meeting with municipal staff on September 6, 2023 to discuss the project. Discussion included a review of changes in the municipality over the past few years, the reasons for the Township's interest in developing a strategic plan now, and future circumstances the Township expects to face over the course of the next five years.

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The project is intended to be completed over the following phases:



1.3 The Purpose of this Report

This report presents the findings of public engagement during the second phase of the project. This report has two objectives. First, for the public, to provide a summary of general responses shared during early engagement in the project. Second, for staff and Council, to provide important additional context with which to inform their decision making for the development of a new strategic plan.



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2.0 Engagement Methods

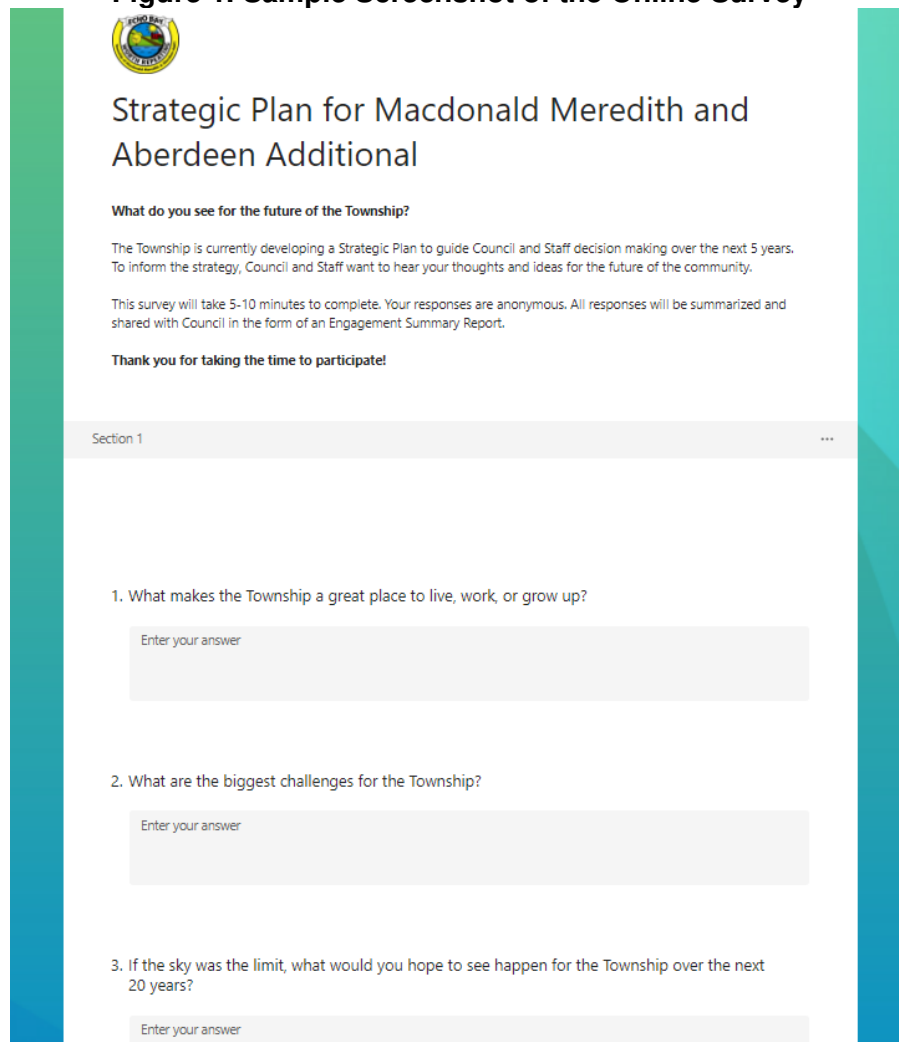
It is important to start Strategic Planning with a strong understanding of both the current experience and desire for change within the municipality. The intent of the current project is to be developed with input gathered from the public, senior staff, and Council. For these reasons, preliminary public engagement began early in the project to gather general input on the strategic plan and the public's ideas for the future of MMAA.

2.1 Community Survey

From October 2 to November 3, 2023 a survey was publicly available online and in paper copies available through the Township office.

The survey was promoted on social media and in the monthly Township newsletter and information with a link to the survey was provided on the municipal website. Township staff also brought paper copies of the survey to events for additional promotion during this time.

Figure 1. Sample Screenshot of the Online Survey



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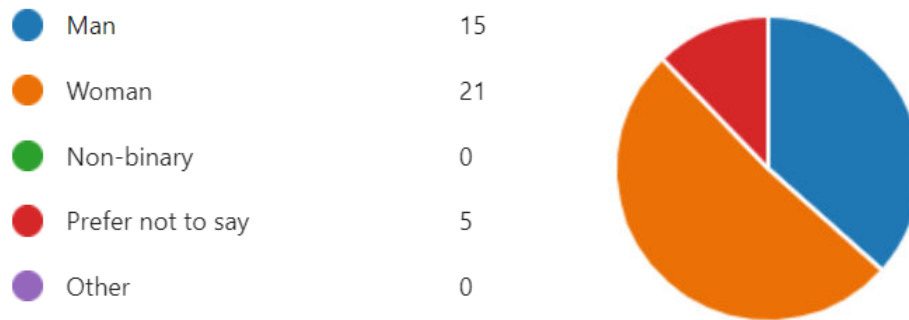
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2.2 Summary of Respondents

During this period total of 42 respondents participated. Two participants responded using paper copies of the survey, and 40 responded via online survey.

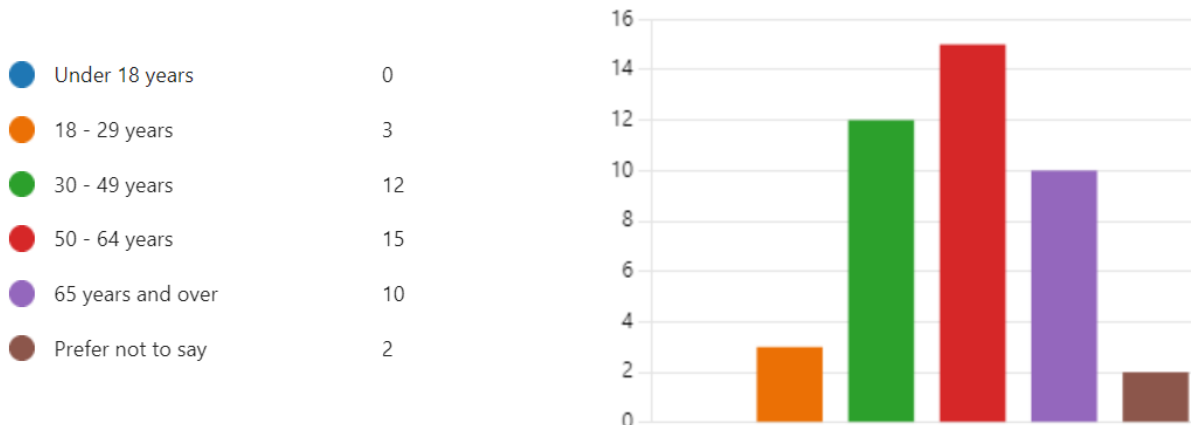
Twenty-one respondents identified as women (50%), 15 as men (36%), and six chose not to specify (14%). Two respondents (5%) identified as visible minorities and a further three chose not to specify.

Figure 2. Respondent Demographics by Gender



The majority of respondents were aged 50-64 years (38%), followed by 30-49 years (29%), 65 years or older (24%), and 18-29 years (7%). No respondents were under the age of 18, and two respondents chose not to specify.

Figure 3. Respondent Demographics by Age



Most respondents (35 or 83%) identify as residents of MMAA, three identify as business owners within MMAA (7%), five identify as farm owners or operators (12%), and 10 identify as members of municipal staff or Council (24%). These categories are not mutually exclusive and multiple responses were permitted.

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3.0 Summary of Findings

The following is a brief summary of findings from the survey. The majority of questions were qualitative to ensure respondents could provide context and examples where appropriate. In cases where responses can be quantified, numbers of responses are provided.

3.1 Strengths of the Township

Respondents had much to say about what makes the Township a great place to live, work, and be. Generally, respondents state that the Township is a friendly and safe community, with a small-town feeling and camaraderie among neighbours and friends. This includes descriptions of:

- Safety and low crime
- Quiet neighbourhoods
- Family friendly
- Retaining a “small town” feeling
- Feeling a part of the community
- Looking after each other and willing to help strangers

“The comradery and sense of local purpose. We live here, we probably grew up here, and we want to raise our families here, giving us all a vested interest in seeing the municipality thrive to its fullest potential.”

– Survey Respondent

Despite being a smaller community, respondents state the Township has many amenities and resources locally, with sufficient proximity to highway access and nearby Sault Ste. Marie for other needs. Local amenities such as access to services, parks, and school within Echo Bay were described.

“...You have the best of both worlds, living in a close knit community within a short 15 minute drive to work, shop or play.”

– Survey Respondent

Relatedly, many respondents had positive feedback about the many community events and programs available for all ages. This included:

- Community days
- Places to gather locally
- Leisure Services Programs
- Regular activities for youth, seniors, and all ages
- Local events, including the parade and music at the Sportsplex

“The many events that township holds for seniors, kids and other age groups are very important to hold a community together and supporting one another...”

– Survey Respondent

Life in the Township is also praised for its:

- Affordability, compared to larger municipalities like Sault Ste. Marie
- beautiful scenery, access to nature, and the aesthetic of rural life
- well maintained roads and parks

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- senior housing
- Low taxes
- Engaged Council and municipal staff
- Pursuit of funding for municipal operations
- Information sharing from the municipality to residents
- Momentum from community projects, such as at Hurley Park and improvements to the sportsplex

3.2 Challenges of the Township

Respondents were asked to share the challenges they felt were most pressing for the Township. They can generally be categorized as follows:

- Lack of local access, to:
 - groceries, shopping, and amenities;
 - employment opportunities; and
 - affordable housing.
- A dispersed population;
- Competition with Sault Ste. Marie for tourism and business
- Development limitations, including:
 - A lack of vacant lands available for future development or recreational use;
 - High costs to operate business locally; and
 - Friction between regulatory bodies.
- Youth retention and population growth; and
- Challenges for municipal governance and operations, including:
 - Maintaining new and aging infrastructure;
 - Maintaining support from the community;
 - Maintaining resident engagement in community issues
 - Capacity limitations of a smaller municipal staff; and
 - Lack of long-term planning and strategic direction for the municipality.

“I think one of the bigger challenges in the township would be community engagement regarding local issues.”

“Maintaining infrastructure and roads including bridges on a small tax base.”

“Have to keep people from all ages together and think as a whole community what's the in the best interest for everyone.”

– Survey Respondents

Other general areas that respondents would like to see improvement, included:

- Daycare spaces;
- Village sidewalks in poor condition;
- Roads and potholes;
- Affordable housing to attract new residents;
- Maintaining property standards;
- Reducing reliance on driving to access daily needs;
- Improved physical accessibility and AODA compliance; and
- Ensuring tangible “value for money” for tax payers

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In addition, there were many comments about balancing the heritage and existing values of the community while welcoming change and growth. This was discussed with reference to:

- Losing the small town feeling as new investments and residents evolve the community
- Balancing farming heritage with development interests, and “forgetting the roots” of the community
- Managing growth while keeping cost of living affordable for existing residents
- Ensuring development does not negatively impact natural features
- Carefully balancing resident quality of life with visitor attraction
- Balancing the focus on retention and attraction of residents for sustainable growth

*“...How to progress forward without losing the sense of connection in the community.”
– Survey Respondent*

3.3 Priority Areas

Respondents were asked to rate how important a series of community topics were to them. Direct responses are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Responses to “How important is it to you that the Township consider each of the following?”

	Important	Not Important	Neither Important nor Unimportant	Don't know/ prefer not to say
Climate Change	60%	24%	17%	0%
Infrastructure Improvement or Maintenance (e.g. Roads, sewage, etc...)	83%	2%	10%	2%
Beautification	55%	5%	36%	2%
Affordable Housing	69%	7%	21%	0%
Attracting and Retaining Residents	69%	7%	19%	2%
Public Safety	81%	0%	14%	2%
Nature Conservation	74%	0%	21%	2%
Education Opportunities	57%	7%	31%	2%
Job Opportunities	57%	12%	26%	2%
Municipal Administration and Governance (e.g. website and digital services, internal staff processes, etc...)	67%	7%	21%	0%
Civic engagement	62%	5%	29%	2%
Engagement with Indigenous communities	55%	19%	21%	2%
Activities for residents (e.g. social, sports)	88%	2%	0%	7%

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Based on these responses, highest importance was given to social and recreational activities for residents (37 responses or 88%), infrastructure improvement and maintenance (83%), and public safety (81%). These findings are to be expected, as these are topics relevant to the ways in which residents and municipalities most frequently interact day to day. Nature conservation (74%), affordable housing (69%), and attracting and retaining residents (69%) were generally also considered important.

Areas such as climate change (60% stated important), municipal administration and governance (67%), civic engagement (62%), education and job opportunities (both 57%), beautification (55%) and engagement with indigenous communities (55%) were also considered important by more than half of respondents, with varying levels of respondents considering these not important or neither important nor unimportant.

In terms of topics considered less important, climate change (24%) engagement with indigenous communities (19%), and job opportunities (12%) had the highest responses stating “not important”. Respondents also indicated more ambivalence for the topics of beautification (15% stated neither important nor unimportant), education opportunities (13%), civic engagement (12%), and job opportunities (11%). Lower ratings of importance for these topics may indicate that they are not priorities for the community or may also reflect feelings these are areas the Township already does sufficient work towards.

In addition to the ratings above, many respondents provided specific examples of other topics of interest. These included:

- Housing, including rental housing, housing for older adults, and balancing housing within the village and rural areas
- Attracting new businesses
- Farming opportunities and protection of farmland
- Telecommunications infrastructure improvements
- Arts and culture, and highlighting local talent
- Public transit and active transportation
- Roadside waste services
- Roadside stormwater maintenance of ditches and drainage, particular to avoid impacts to private wells
- Maintaining and monitoring water quality
- Police and OPP presence to increase community and highway safety

3.4 Ideas for the Future

Respondents were asked what they hoped to see in MMAA long-term, over the next two decades. In addition, throughout the survey, there were many opportunities for respondents to share specific examples they wish to see in the Township. The following is a summary of respondents' general ideas for the future:

- Making use of student and volunteer interests for cost-efficient improvement activities, such as beautification (e.g. a student led program for growing flowers for the Township's seasonal planters)
- Updated waterfront or beach areas for residents and wayfinding to draw tourists (e.g. a picnic area for people to stop off the highway)
- Improved outdoor trails, cycling routes, and winter activities

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- Opportunities for community involvement and skills development to create a next generation of community leadership
- Communication and education for residents around political and governance issues
- More publicly available recreational land and water or beachfront areas
- Sidewalks that can accommodate strollers and wheelchairs
- Upgraded play furniture for children, including splashpads
- Expanding the sportsplex or other rec facilities for more capacity (particularly with dressing rooms)
- A bigger school, and reducing the amount of bussing required for students
- Increased support for farm-based and artisan businesses
- Networked biking and walking trails to feature parks, recreational facilities, and the local environment
- Preserving local wetlands
- Activities for high-school aged youth
- Consider cost savings and efficiencies across smaller townships
- Building on strengths to attract visitors from Sault Ste. Marie and beyond
- Financial incentives to encourage affordable housing development
- Long-term municipal planning for asset management and capital budgeting
- Expanded servicing targeted towards residential subdivisions and industrial park development to attract investment
- Local commercial businesses providing amenities:
 - Groceries
 - Restaurants and cafes
 - Fitness
 - “A trading post” and convenience”
 - A farmers market
 - A plaza or shopping district to feature businesses
- Encouraged support for entrepreneurship in the community (e.g. a business innovation hub)

“In the next 20 years I hope there has been more development within the community, opportunities for employment for our young community members...”

“In a perfect world, I would create a network of biking/walking trails around and through the community for our residents to take advantage of. They would connect our rural environment with the infrastructure already in place (parks, sportsplex, etc.) and encourage healthier living to all our ratepayers.”

- Survey Respondents

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4.0 Conclusion

This report presents findings of initial public engagement to consider strengths, challenges, and priorities of the public when planning strategically for the future. These findings make two bold statements.

First, among the community there is a high level of interest in future plans for the Township. The number and the depth of responses provided in this survey indicate the commitment of the community, staff, and Council towards a long-term vision and planning. There will be future opportunities for public input throughout the project to ensure that the community has ample ways to contribute and see these priorities realized.

Second, the balance of responses are hopeful and excited for the future. All respondents shared many positive attributes of the community and made statements such as the quote below to indicate their support for the Township. The range of challenges and areas for improvement are complemented by many tangible ideas and examples for the future. This interest and enthusiasm for the future of MMAA is an excellent starting point. The strategic planning process will continue to build consensus and can channel this momentum within the community towards implementing and achieving the adopted plan.

This report concludes Phase 2 of the Strategic Plan project. In the following phase, Council and Staff will attend a workshop during a meeting of Council on December 5, 2023 to develop a mission and vision statement and a series of strategic goals for the Township over the next five year period. These will be in a draft form, to be finalized after the workshop and presented to the public for feedback on the statements and goals early in the new year.

“I love echo bay! It feels like home & would love to continue to live here & grow a family!”
- Survey Respondent



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