

Boundaries as Barriers: Creative Muskoka Taking a Regional Approach

A new report from researchers at the University of Toronto on the Creative Economy in Muskoka, “Building Upon Our Rich Resources,” explores the state and potential of Muskoka’s creative economy. The report highlights four primary challenges to fully realizing the potential of the creative economy in the region: communication, a lack of support for youth, entrepreneurs, and diverse populations, social supports (transportation and housing), and seasonality. Two of these – communication and seasonality – encapsulate the exclusive challenge that characterize the entire region.

Six Municipalities: One Exclusive Challenge

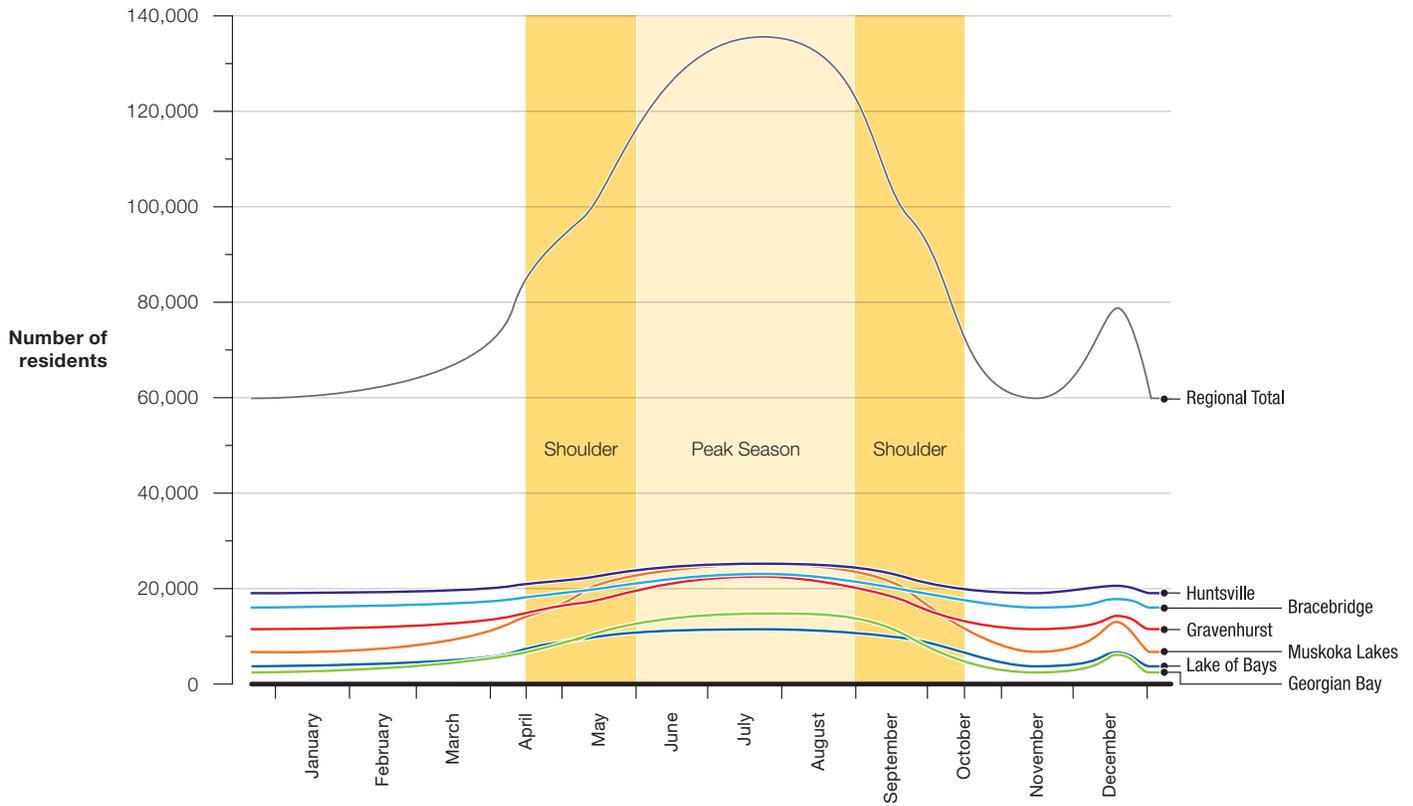
There are six distinct municipalities that form the District Municipality of Muskoka: the Town of Bracebridge, Township of Georgian Bay, Town of Gravenhurst, Town of Huntsville, Township of Lake of Bays, and Township of Muskoka Lakes. The report identifies an unconstructive tendency for these municipalities to work in isolation. Yet rather than frame these municipalities as being in competition with each other, the report emphasizes that economic development in one municipality should be framed as being beneficial across the region, as mobility between where people live and work allows them to spread activity and income.

While it is not uncommon for rural areas to face economic challenges posed by dispersed populations and expansive geography, in Muskoka regional competition and lack of communication posed by this limits the success of new approaches. At the same time that a climate of opposition prevents the sharing of economic development ideas, the region shares specific (and unique) challenges afforded by their geographic location and seasonal service economy. Successfully managing these challenges will require a cohesive course of action on behalf of the entire region.

Muskoka sees an influx of seasonal residents (the May 24 weekend), outpour (Labour Day), and ‘shoulder seasons’ (peak weekends – Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter) (see **Exhibit 1** on next page). The stark disparity in seasonal and year-round population poses an additional dimension of the economic strategy setting in the region that demands a coordinated and mutual response to manage the concentrated burden on the region’s labour force, and its yearly transitions to the “off season.” How might economic development tools change or strategies be modified in the on and off seasons? Is it helpful to pursue the development of the creative economy differently in each season? How do the characteristics of each season demand different levels/forms of said attention? These questions and more are on the table for debate in the region.

Laying a foundation for response, the report identifies several ideas that present opportunity to move forward. Most of all, it encourages citizens and decision-makers in the region to collaboratively seek solutions and strategies to manage an exclusive challenge related to swings in population and economic activity.

Muskoka Region's Population characterized by Seasonal Variability



Source: District of Muskoka. (2009). Demographic Profile.
 *Not including the Wahta Mohawk Territory, but does include Moose Deer Point First Nation
 **Source: Statistics Canada, Census, 2006 with undercount of approximately 4%
 ***Watson & Associates Economists Ltd, 2008
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To learn more about this research, read the [full report here](#).
 For more information about Creative Muskoka, visit www.creativemuskoka.ca.

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