

September 19, 2023

Mayor Tom Piper and Members of Council
Township of Nipissing
45 Beatty Street Nipissing, ON P0H 1W0

Dear Mr. Mayor and Members of Council,

I am writing to you today in response to the request for public input on the [2023-2026 Draft Strategic Plan](#) proposed for our Township. Having now twice stepped forward to be considered for Township Council, one of my primary motivations was in fact the [2019-2024 Strategic Plan](#) and what I felt were contradictions, lack of clarity, and quite simply, a lack of vision for the Township. I felt that the planning process was viewed as a checkbox and wanted to be part of developing a comprehensive plan to help guide the Township for now and for the future. I do not believe it got the attention it deserved in 2019, nor have I seen the plan used in the decision making around the council table. Unfortunately, I feel this has yet again become the case.

I can tell you, that I have struggled mightily with writing this letter, as I feel like the Strategic Plan is still at the starting line, yet I know the process is nearing the end and that the intention is to approve and make this draft strategic plan, the finalized version with perhaps some minor edits on October 17, 2023 as noted by Mayor Piper and the Municipal Administrator in the September 19th Council meeting.

Let me be clear, I am vehemently in opposition to this, and believe that you should consider drastic changes, which understandably will cause significant delays to the project.

With that said, I have tried to organize my thoughts into 5 sections, with recommendations that at times do overlap. As you read through this letter, I hope you will note a particular theme, which is, you cannot have a serious discussion about the contents of the plan, because it is built on a false premise, filled with preconceived notions, in a format so unbefitting of our Township, that we need to rethink the entire process by which this plan was created from.

I have tried to do this with the best of intentions, but some of the planning process does prove to be quite baffling, and nonsensical, and so I apologize if my tone feels off the mark and overly critical. Ultimately, we all want life to be the way it should be, even if we all think it should be a different way. My qualms with the Township slogan aside, let's dive in.

Sec. 1: Timeframe for the Strategic Plan

1. Our existing plan covers a 5 year timeframe, from 2019-2024, and so I am confused as to the rush to start a new plan in 2023, especially given that we will already be 80% of the way through the year if approved on October 17th as planned.
 - a. At the very least, would starting the plan in 2024, not be a better option, even if that results in us having a 3 year Strategic plan?
2. Our existing plan is slated to run through 50% of the time frame of the proposed new plan which in effect would be shortening the previous plan's lifespan by 40%. Is there anything in this new plan that is ground breaking, or will help shape council's decision making?
 - a. If not, why create a plan with a simple 2 year extension? ie. 2025-2026 are the only new years covered by the Strategic Plan
3. If approved as-is on October 17, 2023, we will have already been through 18.75% of the timeframe proposed for this Strategic Plan.
 - a. Planning is, of course, supposed to be about the future, so why is nearly one fifth of the plan, located in the past?
4. Is 3 years really long enough to execute something strategic?
 - a. Does the Council plan to begin the process for the next Strategic Plan again in just over 2 years during an election year (2026), or are we forcing the new Council to scramble or operate without a plan in their first year of office to guide them? If a similar October timeframe for approving were to happen, a new Strategic Plan would be approved mere weeks before a new council were to be elected.
 - i. This feels like a poorly planned end date.
5. Why are 50% of the objectives in the section, "Local Historical and Natural Heritage Features" not set to begin within the time bounds of this plan's period?
 - a. To me, this highlights the limitations of such a short timeframe for this plan, when so much is slated to commence after this plan is no longer in use.

Recommendation #1: Reconsider the plan, and develop a 2025-2035 Strategic Plan that we can be proud of, that meaningfully engages the community and helps to guide the Township of Nipissing over the next decade. This will allow time to rethink, restart, and refocus on key objectives in 2024, while we are still under the 2019-2024 plan.

Other Communities: North Bay has a 10 year strategic plan. In Callander, they look 20 years out for the vision of the community they want to see. While I understand we are a smaller community, in everything I have tried to participate in, it feels as though the Township of Nipissing is last minute, or that this is just the way we have always done it. There is no greater opportunity than the time of Strategic planning to reset this culture, and look towards the future and how we can achieve our goal of "life the way it should be", which is something, I am not sure what is.

Sec. 2: Town Hall Meetings

1. The Town Hall Meetings process to me felt scripted, and discouraged the opportunity for new ideas. I walked away quite disappointed.
 - a. In fact, my public unfiltered comments on Facebook began on June 28, 2023, "Absolutely baffled with what I just attended." For transparency, I have provided an unedited copy of my full unfiltered thoughts following the meeting as Attachment 1. While they are certainly not something I am proud of, I believe within my frustrated remarks, there is a lot of truth to them that should be reflected on.
2. No meeting agenda, public survey, or community involvement leading into the Town Hall.
 - a. While I fully understand, trying to bring ideas in a large group in a limited time frame is impossible, the lead up to these meetings is what disappointed me the most. Other communities will bring together working groups, send out surveys, or invite comments from the community to help shape the topics that matter most to the community, and allow common themes to emerge, and perhaps some surprising ideas that may not have been thought of.
 - b. Brainstorming and ideation were left completely out of the process for the community. What we have produced is a heavily council and staff influenced document, with no core ideas brought forth from the community.

3. Leading the meeting.
 - a. I felt bad for the 3rd party facilitator who was being berated with questions, and trying to not lean on the council to provide answers, but also felt like a fish out of water. The meeting went off the rails quickly, and never got back on them. The meeting felt like a presentation and not a place for collaboration.

Recommendation #2: Create a working committee with both council and community members to create a framework that encourages more brainstorming and ideation. Reach out to the community and engage with them at the core of the plan, and then have additional town halls that offer a more engaging conversation.

Sec. 3: Organization and Structure

I appreciate the new layout and believe it is much more straightforward, however, I only further think that it highlights the gaps in the plan.

1. Goals are de-emphasized, and tactical plans are visually the highest priority items.
2. The numbering system, or lack thereof, makes it hard to reference.
 - a. In the Strategic Plan produced by Huntsville, they use a shorthand for the section, and then a detailed numbering system. This allows for them to produce a report card on how the goals are progressing, but also allows for easy communication on such a topic.
 - i. Ex. Town of Huntsville [Strategic Plan 2019 to 2023 Report Card](#)

<p>2.1 Economic Development (EcDev)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > 2.1.1 Business development > 2.1.2 Smart value housing > 2.1.3 Connectivity > 2.1.4 Tourism development <p>2.2 Culture and Wellness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > 2.2.1 Healthcare > 2.2.2 Recreation and Leisure 	<p>2.1 Economic Development (EcDev)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▾ 2.1.1 Business development <div style="background-color: #f0f0f0; padding: 5px;"> <p>a. Goal: EcDev 1.1: Engage stakeholders and stimulate year-round economy</p> <p>Status: Removed on November 29, 2019 by Resolution 309-19</p> </div>
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Recommendation #3: Create a naming convention with an appropriate level of detail to easily reference various components of the plan.

Sec. 4: Goals

The Town of Huntsville uses 2 separate definitions of goals to great effect in my opinion:

- ★ **“Passive Goals** are goals that uphold the Mission, Vision and Values of the (Township of Nipissing). These Goals are considered to be Continuous.
- ★ **Actionable Goals** are goals that require a specific action to be done to meet an objective. These goals may be considered Not Started, Started, or Complete.”

By breaking down goals into this way, we can better analyze and understand what is to be achieved in this plan, but also what is something that is important and a continuing theme to work towards but never be finished. Additionally, by looking at goals this way, we can further break down the goals that have been established. Starting with the first goal, specifically:

"To ensure the provision of effective and progressive communication with residents and visitors while maintaining municipal services and meeting the needs of the community."

This goal feels as though there is too much going on. What does communication have to do with maintaining municipal services? I feel like there are multiple, quality goals within each, but by not stating them separately, it will be hard to determine success.

1. Ensure the Township of Nipissing residents and visitors are provided with effective and progressive communication.
2. Maintain municipal services, and meet the needs of the community.

These 2 goals could then be associated with the appropriate tactical elements of the plan, to better organize and provide clarity on what it is that is trying to be achieved. Following the Huntsville example:

1. Maintain municipal services, and meet the needs of the community.
 - 1.1. Property Standards
 - 1.1.1. Create a licensing model for short term rental properties including methods of enforcement for excessive noise and disruption.
 - 1.1.2. Develop a property standards policy.
 - 1.1.3. Develop a clean yard by-law, for acceptable restrictions that are enforceable within the Township of Nipissing.

- 1.2. Resident safety and well-being
 - 1.2.1. Implement using radar speed signs
 - 1.2.2. Develop a public education strategy related to speed safety on municipal roadways
 - 1.2.3. Complete a Community Risk Assessment

In just part of the first goal within the draft plan, 6 actionable goals have been extracted and can now be used to measure success. While I may or may not agree with the actual goals of the plan, as residents we are now able to see what has and hasn't been accomplished at the lowest common denominator, while also understanding the high level categories and themes that can be used to justify decisions as they arise throughout the plan's timeframe. This increased level of detail, transparency, and communication is what is desperately lacking within the community.

Recommendation #4: *Adopt the framework of Actionable and Passive goals used by the Town of Huntsville, to better organize and detail what is expected to be achieved, and what is ongoing.*

Recommendation #5: *Break goals down into their lowest common denominator. Simple time bound, specific and achievable are key measures of a successfully stated goal.*

So far, I have focused almost exclusively on the structure and the framework with which this plan has been developed. It is the basis of my comments earlier, feeling like we are at the starting line, and unable to really dive into the meat of the document. In the next and final section, I highlight some themes that I think would be important for discussion and inclusion in the Strategic Plan, but I want to emphasize, this is not an exhaustive list. It is merely the most obvious gaps that I see and would refer you back to *Recommendation #2*.

Sec. 5: Missing Elements

Over the course of the last several years, there are items that I believe have become repeated themes that need to be addressed.

1. The purchasing and RFP process at the Township is flawed.
 - a. Ex. RFP to replace the municipal software package, arrived way over budget, leading to a massive scope reduction to meet budget
 - i. Resulted in keeping various software packages disintegrated

- ii. Did not provide other entities an opportunity to bid on a new scope of work that potentially could have better met our needs. Given the low RFP response rate, it is possible that other firms were put off by the original specs, and would have been more willing to bid with a revised set of requirements
- b. Ex. RFP for a consultant to help find a new CAO
 - i. The consultant listed out in their proposal a number of items that were to be achieved. Nearly none were, including the obvious, which was not hiring a CAO.
 - ii. The contract was never amended at a public meeting (council meeting) to accommodate acceptance of an alternative path, notably a Municipal Administrator, and thus is still a glaring outstanding issue - that shouldn't have been paid, without a Change Order issued.

2. Modernization

- a. One of the key elements in the new software package, which was again referenced in the town hall, was the ability to send digital property tax bills. This is just one example of the type of modernization that we should expect, especially with the announcement that all homes in the township will soon have access to Fiber Optics.
- b. Further on the topic of Fiber Optics, there is no mention of the modernization, or elements that this could play in our township, despite for years having improved internet connectivity as a key priority. How do we not note this in the discussions of home based business, and other areas, with how this will impact the Township moving forward. Surely some efficiencies and new developments will come from this?
- c. Complete Listing of the Township By-Laws online. Currently, I am unclear what the policy is, regarding which by-laws are posted and which ones are not. I think in the digital age we are in, it would be a great addition to be able to sort through and see what has been enacted. I myself, often frequent this portion of the website. It should be noted that when I visited the page earlier today, both a new 2023-09 and old 2021-38 by-law were available, with no clear way to realize that one no longer was in effect without reading the new 2023-09 by-law. This could cause confusion and further is mystifying given not all active by-laws are displayed.

3. Township Committees

- a. There is a large knowledge gap, lack of training, and 0 expectations set from Council with regards to the committees/boards. I believe that a comprehensive review should be taken with regards to:
 - i. What committees are necessary, and important?
 - ii. What the roles of each committee should be?
 1. Specifically the Museum Board focused a majority of their attention on fundraising and events that often conflicted, or was done in partnership with the Recreation Committee. This does align with the goals within the “Local Historical and Natural Heritage Features” section of the plan.
 - iii. What the role, and expectations are of the chair, secretary and board/committee members.
 - iv. I would suggest a welcome package, some form of cloud storage system for meeting minutes (which could equally fall under modernization), plans, and a training session similar to what a council member or mayor may attend would be the minimum.
- b. I will note that a lot of work has gone into this area, with the updated 2023-09 by-law more reflective of the expectations of 4 years and not 1, staff members now sitting in on the committee meetings etc. But a lack of purpose and direction from Council at the outset of the year/term, along with no training on the Strategic Plan of the Township, and why these committees and boards exist, hinders their effectiveness.

4. Capital Assets Plan

- a. While we are expecting an Asset Management Plan update in 2023, I feel it will fall short of what I would expect to be included in the Strategic Plan. In the 2017 version, it was prepared by a 3rd party, and assume that it will be updated by a 3rd party as well. When I am talking about a Capital Assets Plan, I am more focused on what facilities we want to have in our future.
- b. We have moved Council Meetings to a new facility since the last Strategic Plan, we have a Museum in need of foundation repairs, consistent electrical issues etc. Multiple Committees have raised concerns over storage. We need to have a community discussion around what we are wanting in our township. A Bill Barber

styled hockey rink? A new township office that meets the needs of staff and council chambers?

- i. There are a ton of half baked ideas that are happening at committee level, that are reliant on big picture strategic thinking to push them into great ideas. If that is not what we are trying to accomplish with this Strategic Plan, then why are we even pretending that it is valuable and wasting time with it?

Overall, I feel the Strategic Plan misses the mark, excludes a review of the external factors affecting the township, and provides little strategy beyond, "yep, continue to do what we're doing on a daily basis". In fact, it feels as though this entire document is just a written to-do list for the next couple of years, that with or without any public input, strategic thought, or process, would have been accomplished anyways.

I look to the council to inspire, and provide us a vision for the future of the community. To me, this document does anything but that, and to that end, is why multiple young people who have volunteered their time to various boards and committees, most notably the Recreation Committee have come and gone, noting the extremely limited impact that they could have. If we are actively interested as a community to have the next generation want to stay, grow and thrive - contributing to the economic and social well being - we must first be willing to be collaborative and accept new ideas.

Recommendation #6: Please ask yourself, how many communities did I go searching for and review their Strategic Plans? How many ideas did I contribute to this document? How many residents did I reach out to and discuss their ideas with? If you are genuinely thinking that the draft document presented, is a reflection of what you believe to be a Strategic Vision for the community, I implore you to reconsider for the sake of our community and the future of the Township of Nipissing.

I ask that you look within - and decide, is Council right for me? If you are not willing to invest the time and energy into what is a thankless position, with next to no benefits, I ask you to consider resigning from your position. At 1 year into the term, now is the perfect time to admit and accept this may not be what you had hoped for, and that is ok. I invite you to rewatch your discussion on September 19, 2023 regarding this plan, or rather the lack of discussion in the only 1 minute

and 36 seconds dedicated to this project publicly since July 4th Town Hall. The role of council is not to just check a box, and say yes. If you agree with me, and are willing to show courage, I implore you to make a motion, to reject this draft proposal, and direct staff to start the process again, once an appropriate framework is established. Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to hearing the discussion on October 3, 2023.

Sincerely,

Chris Johnston

Chris Johnston

Attachment 1

Facebook post on June 28, 2023 at 8:31pm - following the Town Hall at the Commanda Community Center, posted by Chris Johnston.

Absolutely baffled with what I just attended.

Introducing your new strategic plan Nipissing: <https://nipissingtownship.com/other/strategic-plan/>

It looks identical to the last one, because well, there was 0 room to discuss or improve it in the meeting to discuss it.

We really need to hire some qualified people to lead strategic planning and provide a framework.

Context: we sat there while some guy unrelated to the Township and without any qualifications to lead such a meeting read the old strategic plan and asked what we thought.

That's not how you brainstorm, that's not how you generate ideas.

Strategic planning begins with a framework, it involves multiple steps. It should be started without any preconceived notions. We don't even address the basic elements.

<https://spur-reply.com/.../the-6-elements-of-effective...>

We skip over objectives, time frames, anything that could hold anyone accountable.

At least we know [Joe Bell](#) is excited with their answer, "we're working on it".

Oh and somehow our dumps lifespan went from 70+ years to 17. I'd like to ask a 3rd person, maybe they'd say 500 years?

We've put away \$100s of thousands towards getting internet in the area, never spent it, but we're all getting Fiber by 2025. So where's that money going to be spent.

Also, buying software = communication is solved. That's a new one to me, and given that it's literally my job to program marketing technology for multi-national, multi-million dollar organizations in order to improve and facilitate communications through technology at scale, I hope my boss thinks I'd know something about that.

Also, they're back to complaining about a lack of volunteers. Here's a hint, people like me wouldn't quit, if anything was remotely allowed to be achieved. Ex-Rec Committee; Ex-Museum Board; Name it what it is - Slave count is down, and you'd like more.

Talking Points

1. Museum board & spends 70%+ of their time on Events + Fundraising vs history preservation
2. Over $\frac{1}{4}$ the Active Goals in the plan are happening in the next 10 weeks and nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of the Active Goals are slated to be completed within the next 14 months
3. Eliminate 6/14 pages from the document
 - a. Page 3 needs to be cut; this is not Council's document, it is the long term strategic vision of the community
 - b. Page 4 should be a preamble on the website, and not part of the plan itself. I appreciate the message and sentiment, but this feels like filler.
 - c. Page 5 & 6 can be combined.
 - d. Page 7 & 8 can be combined.
 - e. Page 11, by adjusting the format, at the very least shrinking column 3 to allow more width for column 2, it will allow page 11 and 12 to be combined.
 - f. Page 14's information could be on the cover page, and/or part of a footer on every page.
4. Professional photography to make us appear as if "Tourism" is a major economic driver as stated on page 2