

Has the IDA Sold Its Soul to the Lighting Industry?

By Mark Coady

The International Dark Sky Association, of which the PAA is an organizational member, was formed in 1988 by Dr. David L. Crawford and Dr. Tim Hunter, two professional astronomers, as a grassroots organization designed to promote responsible lighting practices throughout the world and to reclaim our night skies that have been largely lost due to light pollution. Over the following two decades much progress has been made in making the public aware of the damage that unshielded and improperly aimed outdoor lighting can wreak on us and our environment. The PAA has been involved in this fight since the fall of 2004.

Over the past few years the IDA and the Illuminating Engineering Society (IES) have been working together on a Model Lighting Ordinance (MLO) - a generic bylaw that was hoped to address both the needs of those who need outdoor lighting and those who want a pristine night sky. It was hoped that the input of both lighting engineers and informed and active IDA grassroots members, while various draft documents were being presented, would help mould the eventual document into a type of blueprint for light pollution abatement - one that every municipality in North America could easily implement - and certainly one that would help us all in reclaiming our night skies forever.

Unfortunately, with the release of the second draft of the MLO in June of this year, it appears that the joint task force has largely ignored the input of IDA grassroots members and only listened to lighting industry input. Several submissions made by Canadian IDA members, especially from the RASC Light Pollution Committee - including yours truly, on the first draft of the MLO were never even posted to the MLO Comments section on the IDA website. This seems to be causing a serious rift in the IDA membership and is certainly making the RASC re-think its continued support of the IDA's MLO initiative.

The problem stems mainly from the fact that the lighting industry, represented by the IES, seems to be accepting the status quo of improper lighting - at least in our cities and towns. It calls for the establishment of five lighting zones which correspond to going from a city centre out to a pristine countryside: LZ-4 - the downtown core; LZ-3 - the surrounding suburban landscape; LZ-2 - an urban-rural mix; LZ-1 - a sparsely populated rural area; and LZ-0 - the equivalent of a national or a provincial park.

As it is written, municipalities that adopt the MLO seem to have the option of grandfathering all bad lighting designs in their downtown core - whether that be downtown Toronto or downtown Peterborough. Uplighting, glare, and light trespass need not be corrected in these areas. It is almost as if the IDA is throwing in the towel in fighting light pollution in a major city but smaller cities and towns might also be reticent to act due to the lighting zone provisions of the MLO. It is quite possible that a smaller town or city that has the density of zone LZ-3 might classify their locality as zone LZ-4 thinking that they are implementing and enforcing a bylaw that is good for business and

the community when what they are actually doing is encouraging the growth of light pollution.

Another major contentious issue is the amount of exemptions to the MLO. For one, street lighting is exempt from the MLO. Poorly designed and aimed street lighting accounts for about seventy percent of a city's light dome. Government buildings and properties are also exempt which, for a city like Peterborough, means everything from city hall to your local sports field can have their lights glare on forever.

For many years the RASC has used the Town of Richmond Hill in Ontario and the Town of Saanich in British Columbia as examples of municipalities that have gotten it right with light pollution bylaws. There are even better examples of light pollution bylaws in Canada now. Even the noise bylaws of most of the townships that make up Peterborough County have light pollution abatement clauses in them that are less wordy than the MLO but easier to understand and properly enforce.

Even Tucson, Arizona - long held up as an example of a city with a wonderful light pollution abatement bylaw and where you can view the Milky Way from the downtown core - is in danger of losing its night sky. With an ever increasing population the night sky in Tucson is slowly brightening even though it is at a far less rate than other cities that do not practice light pollution abatement. At some point in the future the observatories atop Kitt's Peak and Mount Hopkins may suffer the same fate as those of Mount Wilson near Los Angeles, the Lick Observatory near San Jose, and the David Dunlap Observatory north of Toronto. If the MLO, as written, is adopted across North America then we are definitely worse off than before.

Unless the general IDA membership challenges the draft MLO and IDA leadership, I fear that the true fight for light pollution abatement may suffer a severe setback - one that we amateur astronomers may never recover from.

If you would like to decide for yourself if the draft MLO is a step backwards in the fight for light pollution abatement, or a giant leap forward, you can view or download it from the Members' Only section of the PAA website using the same ID and Password that you use to access the Reflector.