

Citizen's group hosts forum in King on environmental plans

The future of Ontario's protected green spaces may very well depend on the fate of three very important pieces of legislation. To that end, the Concerned Citizens of King Township (CCKT), with support of other environmental groups, is hosting a presentation and round-table discussion April 9 at the Kingbridge Conference Centre and Institute in King City.

The Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan, Greenbelt Plan and Niagara Escarpment Plan are all up for review in 2015 as mandated in the respective Acts which brought them into effect.

This first event of its type will educate and empower attendees to understand the success of these conservation plans to protect land, water and quality of life, and the steps all can take to ensure their protection and enhancement. It will bring Ontario's three predominant environmental coalition action groups together with guest speaker Ontario Environmental Commissioner Gord Miller and an expert discussion panel.

Schomberg resident Greg Locke, chair of CCKT, will be event moderator.

"This event is really the first of its kind," he said. "The three coalition groups representing each plan have never been under one roof before to discuss this common theme. The Kingbridge Centre has provided us their state-of-the-art-facility - this is outstanding. And CCKT has never before been able to promote so broadly before: The London Publishing Corp.'s (Citizen) partnership with us to advertise our event in the majority of its community newspapers, and online, gives our event considerable reach, appropriately as the three plan areas represent a sizable portion of southern Ontario."

"We want to celebrate these plans, because for the most part they've been enormously successful in curtailing runaway urban sprawl and other forms of industrial development, threats to water and resource quality and extraction," he added. "We can thank numerous predecessors for championing these causes . . . Many Ontarians don't know these stories and the profound protections we have in place; we want to educate this history and relevance. Yet we've been criticized as being 'early in the game' to start discussing the reviews."

"Regional governments have started fact-finding and recommendation-gathering processes from local municipalities, commonly conducted without any community engagement or input, not to mention council review and approval," Locke observed. "As innocent as this seems, these initial points become firm, and it's hard to change them later."

"Gord Miller is a most learned and opinionated expert in the environmental field in Ontario, rightly so as Commissioner of Ontario's Environmental Bill of Rights," he remarked. "Did you know we have such a thing? It's unique and it's been successful in part to Gord's staunch defence of it. His ability to reach out in venues like this one to inform and engage, yet in a non-partisan way. Gord will set up the evening for us with his talk."

There will be an discussion panel lined up to field questions from the audience.

Erin Shapero of the Ontario Greenbelt Alliance (OGA), Debbe Crandall of Save the Oak Ridges Moraine (STORM) and Bob Patrick, president of the Coalition on the Niagara Escarpment (CONE), are on-the-ground experts on these plans. David Donnelly will be the fourth panelist. He's a staunch environmental lawyer and advocate, and will provide a very sober layer to the discussion, particularly advising attendees how to engage institutions in these matters.

"STORM is thrilled to be a part of this evening organized by Concerned Citizens of King Township," said Crandall. "It's amazing, 25 years ago people from across the Oak Ridges Moraine gathered here in King City and formed this new group called Save the Oak Ridges Moraine Coalition. So it's quite appropriate for CCKT to be hosting a gathering of people and groups from across the Greenbelt to send a clear message that we're still in the business of protecting our land, water and rural communities. Here's to the next 25 years."

"Ontario's Greenbelt has been working for the past nine years to protect agriculture in the province as well as protect land, air and water for all Ontarians," Shapero observed. "The Ontario Greenbelt Alliance's work focuses on protecting, strengthening and growing the Greenbelt. Sharing information and helping empower and engage communities is a key part of our work as we lead up to the 2015 review."

"Moraines are glacial deposits and only 12,000 years old," Patrick commented. "The Niagara Escarpment has been doing the same thing for 450 million years. Moraines and the Niagara Escarpment are the collectors and the source of the water flowing toward the Great Lakes. The quantity and quality of our fresh water supply depends on the Oak Ridges Moraine and the Niagara Escarpment. We need to learn what local residents wish to see changed during this plan review process."

"Developers and the aggregate industry hate these three plans and are lobbying hard now to scrap them," he added. "Ontario's Places to Grow Plan has increased the pressure to develop on lands now protected to some extent by these three plans. Do we want more roads or safe drinking water? This is what it's really getting down to."

The schedule for the night includes a reception from 6 to 7 p.m., followed by Miller's presentation at 7:15. The expert panel Q&A discussion runs 8:30 to 9:30 p.m.

Admission is free, but CCKT would like those interested to register to get an idea of attendance. For more, visit cckt.ca