

Conservation authority flood programs prevent worse from happening

Keeping people out of flood waters is a focus of flood management programs at Credit Valley Conservation, one of Ontario's 36 Conservation Authorities across the province. But who likes to be regulated?

‘If conservation authorities didn't prevent development in as many flood prone areas as they do, we'd be in a lot more trouble than we are today,’ Conservation Ontario General Manager Kim Gavine said.

Conservation Ontario is the organization that represents Ontario's conservation authorities.

‘It's a hard message to hear when the floodwaters are rising, but prevention is the first step to successful flood management,’ Gavine added. ‘Not allowing development in flood prone and other hazardous areas has to be done.’

Ontario's 36 conservation authorities play a key role in flood management where 90 per cent of the population in Ontario lives.

At the foundation of this program are conservation authority floodplain maps which identify flood-prone areas. Under the Conservation Authority Act, conservation authorities regulate development in these areas.

‘It's not their most popular job,’ Gavine said, ‘but it's a critical piece to protecting lives and property. Living near water is highly valued by us, but during the hot days of summer, we forget that rivers can flood and with growing climate change impacts, this is becoming more frequent.’

Conservation authorities provide flood risk information to municipal planners and the general public to promote proper land use planning and regulation of new and existing development in order to protect lives and homes.

Conservation authorities also maintain \$2.7 billion worth of protective flood infrastructure, such as dams and dykes or purchased lands located in hazardous areas. And, through their watershed management programs, they protect wetlands, forests and other natural features and systems which capture and store floodwaters.

Gavine pointed out there'd be a lot more trouble without the long history and experience of conservation authorities.

They are responsible for monitoring and predicting flood flows and water levels within their watersheds, operating flood control structures such as dams, and disseminating flood messages to local municipalities and agencies. This information is used to support flood forecast, safety and warning messages to the public and many partners including emergency management officials to help keep people out of harm's way in advance of potential flood events.

‘When you look at the country as a whole, federal reports have shown that Ontario comes out on top in terms of how we prevent and reduce flooding and this is because back in the 1940s, the Province and municipalities had the foresight to start to establish conservation authorities across much of Ontario,’ she said.

But Provincial funding for conservation authority flood programs has not kept pace with changing conditions. Today, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry provides \$7.4 million per year to be shared by all 36 conservation authorities for flood operations. Some of the floodplain mapping needs to be updated, flood operations within conservation authorities need expansion and despite some significant ongoing provincial and municipal investments in priority flood infrastructure, there is still a long list that needs to be addressed, particularly in more rural areas.

‘We've been selling a Flood Business Case to the Province which promotes a very cost effective approach to being able to continue to reduce the escalating costs of flood damages which we're having to pay for today,’ Gavine said. ‘We're lucky ? we're not starting from scratch. They can just build off the good work of conservation authorities.’