

Proposed bill threatening conservation authorities? role: CVC

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Conservation authorities across the province are concerned about the proposed changes by the Province that will limit their ability to protect local lands and watershed.

Credit Valley Conservation (CVC) shared their concerns about Ontario's latest budget bill, Bill 229, that will severely impact the role of 36 of Ontario's conservation authorities.

Schedule 6 on Bill 229, is proposed to allow the Minister of Natural Resources hold majority decision making on new developments along with allowing developers the ability to appeal decisions made by conservation authorities to the ministry.

The threat in CVC's role has initiated reaching out to the public to inform them of the role conservation authorities have on protecting their local environment and watershed.

The Bill, which was issued on November 5, made various changes to the Conservation Authorities Act and Planning Act that will limit their role and responsibilities.

Along with allowing the Minister of Natural Resources take over and decide on development permit applications, the changes actually project more costs, delays and red tape as multiple avenues of appeal are made available, which will result in short-circuiting the development review process, according to the CVC.

Changes, they say, will also ?direct board members to act only on behalf of the municipality they represent.?

This will go against the intent of the Conservations Authorities Act which is intended to surpass the political boundaries allowing municipalities to protect and manage their local environment and resources who share a watershed, they say.

Conservation authorities have been protecting and ensuring public safety in this province since 1956, with the necessary tools and abilities under the Conservation Authorities Act and Planning Act.

The CVC is looking for the assistance of the public to help their local conservation authorities by reaching out to their local MPPs and declaring that conservation matters.

?We think that the government should remove schedule 6 on Bill 229, so that it can be properly debated, so that there are no unintended consequences of some of the actions that are being proposed,? explained CVC CAO Deborah Martin-Downs. ?It should have public consultation so that people can weigh in on the relative importance.?

Caledon specifically has areas that are vulnerable to flooding.

Areas such as Terracotta, and Bolton, which suffered from a flood in March of 2019. Inglewood and other locations along the Credit have historical communities know to have flood challenges.

?Our ability to engage in the conservation to ensure that permits or conditions which something would be approved will be properly vetted, through conservation authority and the tools that we have, and that we aren't circumvented through the appeals process that the province is suggesting? said Martin-Downs. ?It's concerning because the Minister doesn't have the tools or the staff to actually make that kind of determination.?

Let's break it down a little bit.

Conservation authorities have been equipped with the tools and knowledge to protect local environments and watersheds across the province for decades. These matters originally began in 2015, where the government noticed that the act was dated and in need of modernization.

They began the process, which was, indeed, later passed, but several provisions of the Act remained untouched due to the timing being months before the election. Since then, the government had yet to proclaim the provisions in the act.

Additional changes were then discussed and added to the Act in the spring of 2019 with, as Martin-Downs stated, "the expectation that it was intended to focus conservation authorities on their mandate."

"We've objected to that terminology because we've always been focused on our mandate, and, in fact, the Province didn't accurately portray our mandate," she continued. "Our mandate has always been management of natural resources on [watersheds]."

Several municipalities have reached out to the province with resolutions expressing their concerns about the proposed changes.

Local conservation authorities work closely with their municipalities and have been for the past decades.

"We've aligned our programs and our services with what municipalities want and need, and the Province actually doesn't understand that," said Martin-Downs. "[The Province pays] virtually nothing for the conservation authorities, yet [they're] trying to very much dictate what they can and cannot do."

With the help of the public, the CVC is hoping to get Schedule 6 removed from the Bill to allow them to continue to their work and dedication to protecting local environment and watersheds.

Conservation authorities are looking to discuss more on the matters and come to a unanimous agreement that will settle the modernization of the act, as well as allowing conservation authorities to keep their role.

Community response has already been incredible, according to the CVC, where thousands of residents have reached out to their local MPPs, and to the province advocating for the conservation authorities.

Exactly 17,829 emails had been sent to the Province through ontarionature.org by press time.

"The natural boundary of the watershed is what we use as our area of interest and how we assess the potential effects of something," said Martin-Downs. "If you don't think about it that way, and that's where we feel the government isn't fully understanding the value of the watershed basis."

She added, "Good land management equals good water management, and we have to have both things if we're going to have a quality environment."

For more information about Conservation Matters and how you can help, please visit cvc.ca.