

November 23, 2020

Via Email

Honourable Doug Ford, Premier of Ontario
Honourable Rod Phillips, Minister of Finance
Honourable Jeff Yurek, Minister of Environment, Conservation and Parks
Honourable John Yakabuski, Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry
Honourable Steve Clark, Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing

Re: Concerns with *Bill 229: Protect, Support and Recover from COVID 19 Act (Budget Measures Act)* - Schedule 6 – *Conservation Authorities Act*

On November 5th, the Province released proposed changes to the Conservation Authorities Act as part of its omnibus bill announced with the provincial budget. The Province has stated they are amending the Act to improve transparency and consistency in conservation authority operations, strengthen municipal oversight and streamline conservation authority roles in permitting and land use planning. Additional regulations under the Act are still to be provided later this fall to provide a more complete understanding of how the changes are to be implemented and what their full impact will be.

We feel it is important to highlight that conservation authorities were originally created to address concerns regarding the poor state of the natural environment and the need to establish programs based on watershed boundaries for natural resource management. Conservation authorities bring the local watershed science and information into decision making to ensure that Ontario's communities are protected.

While we are encouraged that the purpose of the Act to provide for the organization and delivery of programs and services that further conservation, restoration, development, and management of natural resources in Ontario watersheds remains the same, Hamilton Conservation Authority (HCA) is very concerned that proposed changes to the Conservation Authorities Act and the Planning Act if passed, would reduce our ability to protect the natural environment and our watershed, and remove citizen representation and their most valuable insight and input to our Board.

The legislative changes appear to be an excessive intervention in local matters in an area where the Province makes little financial contribution. In the case of HCA, the Province contributes just 2% of the annual revenues for the operating budget. The remaining 98% of our funding comes from our municipal partners (38%) and self generated funds (60%).

Proposed changes provide new appeal avenues for permit applications to go to the Local Planning Appeal Tribunal (LPAT) and even the ability of the Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry to issue certain permits, in place of the conservation authority. It must be stressed that an appeal process already exists to applicants allowing them access directly to the HCA Board, a Board that is built with municipal oversight imbedded. Conservation authorities are important agencies which help protect Ontario's environment. Their science-based watershed information helps to steer development to appropriate places where it will not harm the environment or create safety risks to people. HCA already issues the vast majority of minor and major permits with efficiency and high service standards. HCA is committed to providing excellent client service, and we have a strong history of working cooperatively with our watershed municipalities, residents and businesses to ensure efficient and timely planning and regulatory review processes. Through a review of the current permit review process, Conservation Ontario estimates that the new changes to the permitting appeals process could delay development approvals by as much as 200 days. As well, costs can be expected to increase due to more staff time being required for permit appeals processes rather than time being spent on actually issuing permits.

Changes have been proposed to the Planning Act that create a gap in the land use planning system. Currently, conservation authority participation in the planning appeals process ensures that watershed science and data is being applied to planning and land use decisions. This input would be lost and it is an important tool for HCA to have when needed. Additionally, though unintentional, this change could also impact our right to appeal planning decisions as a landowner. This is a concern as our conservation lands, made up of 11,000 acres of forests, 145 km of trails, fields, streams, wildlife and plant life, are under HCA's care and protection, as they have been for over 60 years.

Conservation authorities have long requested the ability to issue stop work orders to protect environmentally sensitive areas. The proposed changes to the Act remove unproclaimed provisions for this enhanced enforcement and only retain the current tools such as prosecution, injunctions and fines; these existing tools do not provide the ability to effectively stop, on a timely basis, any significant threats and impacts and prevent damage.

As briefly mentioned, if passed, HCA would lose citizen representatives on its board who currently make up half the board of directors. The citizen members come from diverse backgrounds with experience in a number of fields, and are active members of their communities. They bring a wide array of knowledge, governance experience and expertise to their positions. These members provide valuable input on HCA programs and services from a citizen's point of view.

Of equal importance, HCA has only two participating municipalities with 10 members from Hamilton and 1 from the Township of Puslinch, which represents the unique situation of 99% of our watershed being within the City of Hamilton and the City of Hamilton being our major funder. With the new proposed requirements to rotate the Chair and Vice Chair role, there would be no democratic election process given the

representative from Puslinch would simply be appointed as the Vice Chair or Chair every 2 years. And finally, the proposed amendments would also require municipally appointed councillors to make decisions in the best interest of the municipality they represent and not the conservation authority and its watershed, the organization that they are supposed to represent when sitting as a Board member of the Authority. This is contrary to proper board governance.

In these stressful times, nature and the outdoors play an important role in people's mental and physical health. After this year, we have seen just how important these spaces - and that protection - is for our community. We will continue promoting our vision of a healthy watershed for everyone.

We do not want to see an increased risk to public safety, or increased liabilities to the Province, municipalities, and conservation authorities. Nor do we want more red tape, disruption and ultimately delays in helping the government achieve its goal of economic recovery. As such I respectfully ask that as a result of our concerns:

- the Province of Ontario withdraw Schedule 6 of the Budget Measures Act (Bill 229)
- the Province continue to work with conservation authorities to find workable solutions to reduce red tape and create conditions for growth
- the Province respect the current conservation authority/municipal relationships
- the Province embrace their long-standing partnership with the conservation authorities and provide them with the tools and financial resources they need to effectively implement their watershed management role.

If there are any actual and/or perceived issues pertaining to certain conservation authorities, they might best be addressed through area-specific solutions created to resolve them that can be identified through local analysis and consultation.

Sincerely,



Councillor Lloyd Ferguson
Chair, Hamilton Conservation Authority

Cc:

HCA Board of Directors

City of Hamilton Mayor and Council

Township of Puslinch Mayor and Council

Ted Arnott, MPP Wellington – Halton Hills

Andrea Horwath, MPP Hamilton Centre

Paul Miller, MPP Hamilton East – Stoney Creek

Sandy Shaw, MPP Hamilton West – Ancaster – Dundas

Donna Skelly, MPP Flamborough – Glanbrook

Monique Taylor, MPP Hamilton Mountain