

Conservation Authority ? and Council ? worried about Bill?s impacts

The Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority is ?deeply concerned? by the passage of a piece of legislation at Queen's Park they say will dilute environmental protections and raise safety concerns for ?hundreds of thousands? of Ontarians and their communities.

The Conservation Authority (LSRCA) released a statement following Bill 229's approval on Tuesday raising alarm bells over Ontario's use of Minister Zoning Orders and its impact on environmental planning.

?Despite significant opposition from a range of stakeholders and Indigenous groups, and the resignations of half the Greenbelt Council, the Province passed Schedule 6 of Ontario's Budget Measures Act (Bill 229), leaving conservation authorities (CAs) alarmed about the future safety of hundreds of thousands of Ontarians and their communities,? said the LSRCA in a statement.

?Passed on Tuesday, with Schedule 6 intact and with new changes added, Bill 229 now bolsters provincial Minister Zoning Orders by forcing conservation authorities to issue permits, even if they go against their provincially delegated responsibility to protect people, infrastructure, and the environment. This is in addition to the already concerning amendments which included new powers for the Minister to bypass conservation authorities and issue permits as well as curtail the CAs' ability to appeal to the Local Planning Appeal Tribunal.?

In the lead-up to last Tuesday's vote, the concerns voiced by the LSRCA were echoed around the Council table.

Earlier this month, Mike Walters, CAO of the LSRCA wrote to impacted Councils within the Lake Simcoe watershed asking for their support in objecting to the changes, particularly the elimination of ?Conservation Authorities' science-based watershed approach? to protecting the environment and the removal of Authorities' ability to ?independently appeal decisions made around permits and municipal planning applications.

?Conservation authorities' regulatory role is not always a popular one, but it is very important,? wrote Walters. ?Being able to participate in appeals processes ensures that the watershed lens is being applied to planning and land use decisions and that people and their property are protected from natural hazards such as flooding.?

Speaking in favour of standing in solidarity was Councillor Wendy Gaertner, who represents Aurora at the LSRCA.

?I think the concerns of the Conservation Authority are valid and obviously they are very concerned,? she said. ?At the end of the day, the Conservation Authority is there to protect us, so I would like to support what they are [asking] us to support.?

While Council members were largely supportive of their request, they asked for more information on the potential impacts of objecting to the proposed changes.

?On the surface, I support doing this ? I read through it and didn't see any issues ? however, I think it would be prudent to have staff review it and make sure from the Town of Aurora's perspective it is what we want to do,? said Councillor John Gallo. ?I suspect at the end of the day it is going to be a 'yes' but I think it is a good exercise to go through.?

Mayor Tom Mrakas agreed that having ?as much of a perspective on the Town? as possible would be ?very helpful? but he was in favour of ?standing with the rest of our municipalities with the conservation authorities.?

Similar views were also expressed by Councillors Michael Thompson and Rachel Gilliland.

?Based on what I have read and seen in other municipalities with other Regional Conservation Authorities, it is all similar,? said Councillor Thompson. ?The opposition and the concerns are fairly united across the board [and] I am happy to lend my voice to it.?

Added Councillor Gilliland: ?I one hundred per cent understand the need and the urgency to make sure the Province does understand that this does make it a lot [more difficult] to protect the environment, the wetlands, and the effects of flooding potentially effecting the neighbours. Essentially what this Bill is saying is that the Ministry could overturn what the LSRCA has recommended and we want to have those protections. I also agree with municipal elected officials as having part of the say and being a part of the process.

?I think there are lot of things here that are being missed?with this new Bill and it could just be that it is maybe without a careful review. Here's an opportunity to make some changes and I'm glad our Conservation Authority has taken this step to send a message and I truly hope this helps, they (the Province) listen, and make some of these adjustments.?

Following the Bill's passage, reaction came quickly from Regional Chair Wayne Emmerson, who also serves as Chair of the LSRCA, as well as Mr. Walters.

?We did everything in our power to share our concerns with the province, including a unanimous board-endorsed resolution calling for the removal of Schedule 6,? said Mr. Emmerson in a statement. ?While this new legislation included some concessions, it stands to raise a number of unprecedented challenges related to planning and permitting.?

Added Mr. Walters: ?One of our main concerns is that we'll be forced into approving permits that may cause flooding and erosion and jeopardize human health and safety; it's certainly not the outcome we had hoped for.

?Our new way of business will have to focus on how to bring the less environmentally-conscious on board with the science behind our decisions and hope that they will meet any necessary conditions of approval so that we can mitigate as much damage and harm as possible. The alternative is really just going to mean more delays and greater costs to the taxpayers of Ontario.

?LSRCA is grateful to its numerous supporters who sent letters, emails, media releases, and all the residents who signed petitions, called their MPPs and expressed support for the work we do. Your message was heard by LSRCA and we will continue to operate in a manner that maintains your trust. We will also continue to encourage the Province to work more closely with us to ensure that Ontarians and our natural environment remain safe and healthy.?

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter