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Greenbelt Council

Conseil de la
ceinture de verdure

December 7, 2019

Honourable Steve Clark
Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing
777 Bay Street, 17th Floor
Toronto, ON M5G 2E5

Re: Watershed Planning and Management Protects and Sustains Ontario's Greenbelt and the entire Greater Golden Horseshoe

Dear Minister Clark,

It is my pleasure to send you the Greenbelt Council's ninth progress report as we proceed through our 2019/20 work program.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David Crombie".

David Crombie
Chair, Greenbelt Council

Copies to:

Kate Manson-Smith, Acting Deputy Minister
Greenbelt Council members
Ed McDonnell, CEO, Greenbelt Foundation
Kevin Thomason, Director, Grand River Environmental Network
Blair Feltmate, Head, Intact Centre on Climate Adaptation, University of Waterloo
Andrew McCammon, Executive Director, Ontario Headwaters Institute
Greater Golden Horseshoe stakeholders

Greenbelt Council for the Greater Golden Horseshoe Report #9 (November 2019)

Continuing its practice of distributing progress reports after each meeting, the Greenbelt Council is pleased to share its ninth report. It communicates our work in considering matters of public interest with respect to Ontario's Greenbelt and the implementation of the *Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe*. The Greenbelt Council is mandated by the Province of Ontario to provide advice to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

At its meeting October 28, 2019, Council engaged the following experts to talk about the benefits of watershed-based planning and management and the consequences of diminishing this systemic approach: Kevin Thomason, (Director, Grand River Environmental Network), Blair Feltmate (Head, Intact Centre on Climate Adaptation, University of Waterloo), Andrew McCammon (Executive Director, Ontario Headwaters Institute), Edward McDonnell (CEO, Greenbelt Foundation), and Shelley Petrie (Program Director, Greenbelt Foundation). Council also heard from Pauline Desroche (Manager, Resource Development Section, Ministry of Natural Resources), who summarized proposed changes to the *Aggregate Resources Act*.

The follow highlights the information and commentary Council gleaned from its guests and the ensuing dialogue that helped to shape its recommendations:

1. Greenbelt Council recommends the Provincial Government reaffirm the critical importance of watersheds as the basis for planning, managing and monitoring the health of our natural resources and systems—which provide Greater Golden Horseshoe communities with a sustainable supply of clean water—and ensure that watershed planning is enabled in the Government's anticipated regulations pursuant to the amended *Conservation Authorities Act*.
2. Greenbelt Council recommends the Provincial Government support and strengthen the mandate of the conservation authorities as stewards of the Greater Golden Horseshoe's watersheds and thus the ecosystems that protect and sustain the Greenbelt and the entire Greater Golden Horseshoe.

Value of Watershed Planning

The Provincial Government has repeatedly announced that it will not approve anything that would jeopardize the Greenbelt. However, the Greenbelt is part of an interconnected bioregion, and you cannot protect the Greenbelt without maintaining the health of its watersheds—both directly and indirectly—and the connectivity among them.

Multi-jurisdictional watershed planning—providing an ecosystem approach to protecting natural resources and managing and sustaining ecological functions across municipal boundaries—is a best practice. It helps to protect the quality and quantity of our water and the health of our communities. It helps to ensure that people living downstream don't pay the cost of poor decisions made upstream. It supports cost-effective natural infrastructure. While municipalities are a logical partner in watershed planning, they often rely on the scope and jurisdiction of their local conservation authority to bring together stakeholders and identify contributing issues outside their boundaries.

Watershed ecosystems provide communities with a diverse range of services—providing food and water, stabilizing water flows, supporting cultural and recreational activities, among others. To maintain these services requires that we not only reduce our impact on the ecosystems, but that we are diligent in monitoring and maintaining their health. The regulations being made under the new *Conservation Authorities Act* must acknowledge that watershed-based planning and management has always been a core mandate of the conservation authorities and is increasingly important in addressing the risks that Ontarians face from climate change, changes in water quality and quantity, and the increasing incidences of flooding.

In addressing the concerns of some members of the development industry about the timely processing of development applications by conservation authority staff, it is important to understand the context. For many, the source of these concerns goes back 20 years when the provincial government transferred, through memorandums of understanding, many of its ministries' development review responsibilities to municipalities that lacked the staff resources and expertise to fulfill these roles. To assist, many conservation authorities began providing additional expert advice to municipalities on a variety of environmental matters at a time when their funding had also been significantly cut.

Over time, as municipalities gained expertise in environmental review, conservation authorities and municipalities developed relationships that are unique to the needs and capacities of both organizations. Even where municipalities had developed expertise, conservation authorities may be commenting as a regulator, land owner or on behalf of a municipality as an expert advisor under a memorandum of understanding, and this may have added confusion to the review process. Adding further confusion, the role of the Province in the development review process has evolved through no-window to one-window to legislation-specific engagement by designated ministries.

Today, most of the industry's legitimate concerns about the environmental review process have been resolved through improved coordination among review agencies that is a direct result of multi-jurisdictional participation in watershed planning processes. In fact, the inter-municipal coordination role played by conservation authorities is often a key element in reducing the time taken to resolve issues when applications affect multiple jurisdictions. Watershed planning, often coordinated by conservation authorities, has become best practice throughout North America.

Urban expansion and development pressures, however, continue to threaten headwaters and important natural heritage areas. At the same time, climate change is amplifying the effects on water systems and increasing risks of flooding and drought. As a result, the financial and social costs of extreme weather events are increasing.

Conservation authorities have the expertise to reduce those risks. Through watershed planning and management, they help to protect the natural infrastructure that is so critical to achieving healthy, sustainable communities. Additionally, conservation authorities educate communities about the critical importance of embracing natural solutions to watershed challenges.

At a time when we need to be gearing up to address the climate crisis, it is costly and short-sighted to undermine the one group of agencies—conservation authorities—that has significant expertise, a proven track record in successful on-the-ground implementation of watershed-based programs, and historical knowledge in the very areas where the greatest threats exist.

Population data

Council has not yet reached conclusions about the research undertaken by Council Member Kevin Eby and the Greenbelt Foundation highlighting the magnitude of the differences between the 2019 Ministry of Finance population projections for Greater Golden Horseshoe municipalities and the Growth Plan's municipal population forecast. However, we note that there could be significant consequences, including financial implications, for individual municipalities and the broader Greater Golden Horseshoe as a whole unless these projections/forecasts are appropriately reconciled. The data needs to be further explored and consideration given to the implications on urban expansions, agricultural land consumption and potential development charge shortfalls, among other matters.