

A submission under Application ID 26621

The Grand River's Day of Glory

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The Government of Ontario has announced plans to seriously reduce the role and powers of our conservation authorities. Twenty years ago this past September the Grand River Conservation Authority had its proudest moment and was the focus of international attention. That historic event bears an important message for us today.

European settlers were not very kind to the land they had taken over and broken in the Grand River basin. Erosion became widespread, and extensive areas were susceptible to floods. Deforestation, agricultural runoff, industrial wastes, and water pollution reached dangerous levels.

Luckily, the looming disaster was avoided in 1946 when concerned conservation pioneers convinced the Province to establish a new, visionary municipal partnership along the length of the Grand River: the GRCA. The hard, steady work on recovery began. The results have been wonderful: the river is now one of the healthiest in North America, the landscape is resilient, community health is assured, important natural areas and wetlands are protected, and many partnerships with community organizations, municipal offices, volunteers and educators have flourished. There are now 37 conservation authorities in Ontario.

In 1999 an Australian company, Thiess Environmental Services, established the Thiess International Riverprize to recognize outstanding river management worldwide. Submissions were to be judged by four criteria: demonstrated performance in management outcomes along a river and its basin; cooperative participation among different levels of government, community and industry; innovation in science, planning, policy and institutional arrangements; and high levels of public accountability.

The GRCA entered a submission. Its preamble stated “ours is a story of the recovery of the Grand River from years of degradation and industrialization and how we are working together to keep it healthy for future generations”. There were dozens of competing submissions from around the world.

In July 2000 the GRCA learned that it had won. It was invited to send four representatives to be the featured speakers at a special symposium on September 6 in Brisbane, Australia, with a spectacular award ceremony the next day. GRCA chair Peter Krause recalls: “It was the moment of a lifetime. Imagine standing on a stage at the other side of the world, in front of the world’s most respected authorities on river management, and being told that this year you are the best!”

Australians love big celebrations and the Thiess organization was no exception. First the Riverprize citation was read: “The Grand River Conservation Authority

has shown remarkable achievement across the range of judging criteria. The authority offers important lessons for river managers everywhere. It has delivered remarkable environmental success while also providing for human needs, a delicate balancing act that communities and governments struggle with all over the world.”

Next came the celebratory ‘Riverfeast’. The Victoria Bridge in the heart of Brisbane was cordoned off and thousands of guests sat down to a lavish dinner served by the city’s leading restaurants. The evening ended with a spectacular fireworks display over the Brisbane River. The media were full of articles and interviews that lavished praise on the guests from Ontario.

In a special issue of its newsletter, Grand Actions, the GRCA reflected on the significance of the award: “To be compared with other agencies and organizations in the world and to be considered one of the very best is a tremendous accolade. It also reminds us that we shouldn’t take our collective efforts and expertise for granted. This recognition provides us all with an exciting and remarkable opportunity to assume a stronger leadership role in resource management in the watershed, provincial, national and international context.”

The GRCA received many congratulatory letters. Ontario Premier Mike Harris appreciatively wrote: “The GRCA was the first watershed and river management organization in Canada, and the third oldest in the world. This award reflects the respect and admiration of your industry. The contribution you have made to the

community is an inspiration to other organizations and individuals and to all of Ontario.”

In 2009 the Lake Simcoe District Conservation Authority also won the Riverprize. It appears that no other jurisdiction in the world has won this prize twice.

The Ontario conservation authorities have developed and flourished for 74 years, under 11 different premiers from three political parties. The initiating government was that of George Drew whose Progressive Conservative Party has been in power for about 47 years of the GRCA’s existence.

Premier Ford’s government is a disappointing and embarrassing exception. Bill 229 threatens to dismantle much of the powers of the conservation authorities. The results could be disastrous for our watersheds and Ontario’s wonderful reputation in river basin management will be damaged.