

The Grand River's Day of Glory

A submission under Application ID 26621
To the Standing Committee on Finance and Economic Affairs of the Ontario
Legislative Assembly of Ontario

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Submitted by:
Greg Michalenko
On behalf of the Grand River Environmental Network
53 Menno St
Waterloo, ON
N2L 2A6
519 725-1059
gcmichal@uwaterloo.ca

Who We Are

The Grand River Environmental Network (GREN) is a voluntary, non-profit association of residents of the Grand River watershed whose objective is to safeguard and improve the environment of the watershed. We hold educational meetings, prepare statements on environmental policy and its implementation, meet with or appear before municipal councils, and liaise with other organizations and individuals with common interests.

Our Concerns for the Welfare and Future of Ontario's Conservation Authorities

All land within six miles of the entire length of the Grand River was deeded to the Six Nations by the British Crown, but most of it was swindled from them by European settlers who broke the land but did not know how to extend the long-term care it needed. Serious environmental and health-threatening problems soon loomed in Ontario: widespread deforestation and erosion, critical water quality and water provision problems, depleted wildlife populations, widespread threats of flooding.

The Grand River Conservation Authority, the oldest in Canada, was created by the Government of Ontario in 1946 in response to the efforts of visionary conservation pioneers.

By and large, the work of the conservation authorities has been effective. For example, under the care of the Grand River Conservation Authority (GRCA) our local Grand River has been transformed from a seriously polluted and industrially contaminated stream to a watershed with greatly reduced flood threats, vastly improved water quality to the extent that the sports fishery is once again flourishing, a place where river otters can once again be seen within the city limits of Kitchener-Waterloo, and once-threatened bald eagles are now happily nesting along the river.

On August 16, 2019, the Honourable Mr. Yurek, Minister of Environment, Conservation and Parks, wrote a letter to the Ontario Conservation Authorities commanding them “to begin preparations and planning to wind down those activities that fall outside the scope of your core mandate”. It is still not clear what the “core mandate” is.

Schedule 6 is Counterproductive

Now Schedule 6 of Bill 229, the Protect, Support and Recover from COVID- 19 Act, proposes fundamental changes to the Conservation Authorities Act that would severely limit the responsibilities, roles, and powers of conservation authorities in land use planning, administration and management

We are greatly concerned that this is a counterproductive approach that will seriously damage the valuable work and accomplishments of our conservation authorities. Much of their success is due to the evolution of the conservation authorities from their original top-down administrative format to a far more constructive, effective, and financially economical model that recognizes that successful outcomes of leading-edge management of large river basin systems only occurs if there is widespread public acceptance of and involvement in the programs of the authorities. We are concerned that the present Ontario Government review of the mandate of the conservation authorities is looking backward rather than forward. The enlightened approach, of proven effectiveness, is to *engage* the community, not ignore it. The Ontario conservation authorities have been so successful in this regard that they are now viewed – quite rightly – as world leaders in river basin management.

Examples of the GRCA's productive management approach.

The GRCA knows how to promote and nurture productive relationships with community groups. Here are a few illustrative examples of their expertise. What will the effects of the proposed cutbacks be on such activities?

Land rehabilitation by volunteer community groups

The Township of Woolwich Environmental Enhancement Committee has for over 25 years benefited from what they acknowledge as “invaluable” services the GRCA has provided to two of the committee’s groups, Clean Waterways, and Trees for Woolwich. Staff from the GRCA offered their expertise and local knowledge to help make possible the planting of over 50,000 trees. They conducted hands-on visits with the volunteers to appraise site and species selection. They helped the groups to establish collaborative relationships with farmers to fence livestock out of creeks, and plant trees and shrubs along floodplains to reduce erosion and cool the water. They helped Trees for Woolwich establish its own volunteer tree nursery, and plant living snow fences along roadways. The Chair of the Committee has written “the GRCA is an essential part of our past and future success as volunteers dedicated to greening Woolwich. A successful example of the outcome of this partnership is shown in “before” (2005) and “after “ (2018) photographs of the same remediated site two page below.

Averting a public health disaster

Volunteers from Woolwich also organized around dealing with serious soil and waterway contamination by carcinogenic residues from a chemical plant in Elmira that produced Agent Orange, an extremely toxic herbicide used by the American Army in the Vietnam War. The Ontario Ministry of the Environment produced a study of the situation but stated it was not its responsibility to inform the affected rural community of its findings and the risks people and

their farms faced. Luckily the GRCA staff, with its trusted relationship with the Mennonite farm community, stepped up to spearhead the work of the Woolwich volunteers.

Sophisticated cost-saving project design

In 1971 – and again in 1974 – floods of a size expected only once in a hundred years occurred along the Grand River, causing much damage in Cambridge and Brantford. Ontario Government ministries announced that a flood control dam should be constructed on the Grand River at a cost of over \$300 million. Farmland would be lost, natural areas drowned, and Amish farmers would face long detours in their horse drawn carriages to go to church or conduct business and social visits to their community on the other side. Fortunately the GRCA, with its intimate knowledge of the area and experienced staff, was able to design a flood control program that was far more sophisticated, much less intrusive, and considerably less expensive. Through channel improvement, reconfigured floodplain zoning, and a variety of other thoughtful measures, the flood threat was mitigated – and taxpayers' money was saved.

Promoting voluntary changes in domestic water use with enormous cost savings

The benefits of the GRCA's programs are also financial. Earlier professional studies by the Province indicated that a very expensive water pipeline would have to be built to bring water from Lake Erie to bolster the limited water resources of Kitchener, Waterloo, Cambridge and Brantford. These communities, with a total population of over 700,000, are now the fourth fastest growing urban areas of Canada, as well as the most dependent on groundwater for domestic and industrial needs in all of Canada. Fortunately, under the leadership and wisely chosen policies and programs of the GRCA in collaboration with the municipalities, the goodwill of residents was easily recruited to address water consumption. The result has been a *voluntary* 50% reduction in per capita water use and an estimated \$2 billion expenditure has been averted: we don't need the pipeline after all!





Partnering for public education

The GRCA also plays a crucial role in fostering environmental education in the Grand watershed. For example, it has a long-standing agreement with the Waterloo County Board of Education to run formal programs through rented space, and access to its forest at its Laurel Creek Nature Centre within the city limits of Waterloo. Over 10,000 school children benefit every school year.

3. Collaborative administrative models are the key to success in leading-edge river basin management

The examples above illustrate the strengths of Ontario's conservation authorities' standard model of administration, perfected over many decades:

- The collaborative model works well: it achieves its objectives in optimizing positive outcomes to safeguard health, safety, and environmental protection.
- Local volunteer initiatives thrive when there is strong institutional support and nuanced guidance from conservation authorities.
- The creativity and wisdom of local knowledge is tapped for better outcomes which benefit everyone.
- Conservation authority activities have evolved successfully over time, not only to take care of the original mandated responsibilities, but also to meet complex new challenges.
- Considerable recreational and educational benefits can be accommodated.
- Social learning is nurtured and stronger rural communities prosper.
- Financial savings are considerable, and can amount to millions of dollar

We are proud of the success of Ontario's world-leading conservation authorities. It would be a disaster if we turned our backs on this achievement and reverted to an out-dated, unproductive, and backward model. Ontario's reputation as a world leader in conservation could be severely damaged.

The CRCA's Finest Moment

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.

In 1999 an Australian company, Thiess Environmental Services, established the Thiess International Riverprize to recognize outstanding river basin management worldwide. Submissions were to be judged by several fundamental criteria capture the critical foundational elements of successful river basin management:

1. **A long term, approved strategy or watershed plan** that clearly lays out the current state of the system, scientific targets, protection and remediation plans, financial strategies, collaboration and demonstrated success. The strategy must be integrated in terms of addressing a systems/ecosystem approach.
2. **Collaborations and partnerships are required** both financially and from a volunteer perspective. Collaboration with ratepayers, community groups, business, industry, the academic community, indigenous people and all levels of government are required.
3. **Stakeholder engagement through effective communication and outreach** must be demonstrated. Tools for effective communication such a surveys, community meetings, stakeholder involvement in developing and implementing the plan, social media, etc. must be outlined

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 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.

Community Engagement is Key to Watershed Management

The GRCA has stressed its gratitude for the hundreds of partnerships that have helped to identify key issues and set priorities for action. Fostered through monthly newsletters, special events along the river and the Grand Action Registry, these committed partnerships have strengthened a sense of community ownership in the stewardship of the river.

Liaising and collaborating with farmers, outdoor and environmental educators, municipalities, anglers, conservationists, school boards, 4H clubs, health authorities, girl guides and boy scouts, spirited individual volunteers, innovators, campers, hiking and canoeing clubs, heritage advocates, First Nations, service clubs, scientists and university graduate students, outdoor enthusiasts, and myriad others *is core* for successful outcomes, not peripheral.

The Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority

In 2009 the Lake Simcoe District Conservation Authority also won the Riverprize. It appears Ontario is the only jurisdiction in the world that has won this prize twice. The Thiess Riverprize made the following announcement in awarding the 2009 prize to the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority:

“The Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority (LRSCA) is a community-based environmental agency that was established to manage natural resources on a watershed basis, and to initiate local improvement programs. The LSRCA worked in partnership with communities and municipal, provincial and federal governments to deliver practical and cost-effective local solutions to address a range of natural resource challenges, delivering programs in science and research, protection and restoration, and education and outreach.”

Schedule 6 is demonstrably defective legislation and must be withdrawn.

The Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority’s commented on its success in winning the prize in 2009 noting:

“[Our] submission demonstrated watershed excellence on a number of fronts related to the protection of Lake Simcoe and its entire watershed, including those headwaters rising on the Oak Ridges Moraine. These actions included:

- strong leadership, partnerships, collaboration and accountability,
- solid science to support conservation effort,
- specific and measurable progress and achievements,
- an integrated watershed management approach,
- successful restoration projects,
- a strong outreach program and documented achievements in organizational capacity.

Lake Simcoe 's list is an excellent summary of the essential foundations of *any* successful contemporary watershed management agency. Take a look at each item in the list: you will see that Schedule 6 will weaken almost every element. Leadership ability will be seriously affected. Currently the Ontario conservation authorities are the world standard. Their powers should not be weakened or ceded to politicians and profit-oriented developers. Integrated watershed management will be much more difficult. For example, municipalities will be denied the choice of selecting a knowledgeable and experienced resident volunteer to be their representative on the conservation authority board instead of just a municipal councillor.

Political Recognition

The GRCA received many congratulatory letters o winning the Riverprize. 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."

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. In all this time, the authorities' independence in exercising its designated responsibilities was always respected and appreciated.

Schedule 6 of Bill 229 threatens to dismantle much of this institutional heritage. The results could be disastrous for our watersheds and Ontario's wonderful reputation in river basin management will be damaged.

We request that Schedule 6 be withdrawn.



