

2789 Concession 7
Uxbridge, ON L9P 1R4

By email to: glo@ontario.ca

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Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks
Great Lakes and Inland Waters Branch
40 St. Clair Avenue West, Floor 10
Toronto, ON M4V 1M2

**Re: Response to Request for Comments
Modernizing Conservation Authority Operations
Conservation Authorities Act ERO #013-5018**

I have lived for 40 years in Durham Region on the Oak Ridges Moraine, at the junction of three different watersheds which fall under the authority of three different conservation authorities: Central Lake Ontario Conservation Authority (CLOCA), Lake Simcoe Regional Conservation Authority (LSRCA), and Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA). I live immediately adjacent to 650 acres owned by the Region of Durham and managed by LSRCA, and directly across the road from 3780 acres owned and managed by TRCA.

I have worked for 35 years as public health nurse and in 2015 I completed a Masters degree in Public Health. During my studies I focused on the role of greenspace and nature in human health, and ways to increase access to and use of greenspace. I have since been applying these learnings to my work with a charitable organization which focuses on land conservation, development of trail networks, and stewardship; this work requires that I work closely with staff from two different conservation authorities. On my own 40 acre property we have placed a conservation easement, in which we donated the right to any development to Environment Canada; oversight and monitoring of this easement is provided by TRCA. Thus, while I am not a water scientist or an ecologist I have a more than average understanding of some of the work of conservation authorities, and an appreciation for the important role of watersheds.

I have reviewed the Made in Ontario Environment Plan, and have been following and commenting on the recent series of postings on the Environmental Registry of Ontario including this one, a proposal to “clearly define the core mandatory programs and services provided by conservation authorities to be natural hazard protection, conservation and management of conservation authority lands, drinking water source protection, and protection of the Lake Simcoe watershed”. I have four comments to share.

1) Climate Change

The proposed change emphasizes the important role played by conservation authorities in addressing the impacts of climate change which are now upon us. The severe flooding events across eastern Canada this spring and in recent years have demonstrated that there are growing risks associated with the changing climate, and that more frequent, and more severe flooding is to be expected in the coming

years. The conservation authority model has been identified by risk experts as one effective approach for managing flooding ¹. Recent flood events in Ontario provide a superb example of what conservation authority expertise looks like when applied and why we need it. Conservation authorities, with their watershed scale of focus and enormous range of scientific and policy expertise are ideally situated to provide guidance, leadership, undertake research and make recommendations about other effective risk management approaches to flooding at this critical time. **I support this proposed changed which ties the work of conservation authorities more directly to efforts to adapt to climate change. I also support the funding increase which may be required to assist conservation authorities to better meet this greater demand.**

2) Watershed Scale

The proposed conservation act amendment open for comment on the Environmental Registry of Ontario (ERO) mentions the Lake Simcoe Watershed, but not other watersheds. Perhaps this is simply an oversight, and that it is intended that conservation authorities continue to work at a watershed scale across the Province. Water does not respect municipal boundaries. Organizing the work of conservation authorities in a similar manner is only sensible. **A watershed scale for the work of conservation authorities needs to remain and be clearly stated.**

3) Conservation lands as a resource for health

Just as climate change has emerged as an issue since creation of conservation authorities, so has the population increased and intensified around many of the lands owned and managed by them. As stated in the ERO posting, conservation authorities are the second largest landowners in Ontario. 90% of the population of Ontario lives within the jurisdiction of one of these conservation authorities. TRCA is the largest of the conservation authorities with 40,000 acres of natural environment lands owned in one of the most densely populated areas in North America.

These conservation owned/managed lands, many of them publicly accessible, are an important resource for public health. In addition to the role the lands play in flood management and prevention they are also reservoirs for biodiversity, the trees growing upon them clean our air, and these lands protect drinking water sources. For visitors to the lands which have trails, they also provide an increasingly important respite from stress. The World Health Organization has called stress the “health epidemic of the 21st Century”, and stress is at the root of most chronic diseases such as heart disease and diabetes. Time in nature has been identified as an increasingly important low-cost, “low-tech”, and effective strategy to reduce stress. The strongest evidence for the positive effects of nature is on mental health.

The Made in Ontario Environment Plan identifies several goals: increase the number of Ontarians taking advantage of Ontario parks, promote the link between health and nature, and create new trails. Conservation authority lands are ideally situated to address these goals and should be mentioned explicitly in the Plan (the term conservation reserves is used; the meaning of this term is not clear to me). Lands managed/owned by conservation authorities are close to where people live, often

¹ Henstra, D., Thistlethwaite, J. (2017) Climate Change, Floods and Municipal Risk Sharing. Institute on Municipal Finance and Governance, Munk School of Global Affairs, University of Toronto.

accessible by public transit, and many properties have existing trails which people are able to use and enjoy.

Over the 40 years I have lived beside two large tracts of conservation-owned and/or managed land, I have witnessed firsthand the evolution of activities on these properties. The population has grown in neighbouring townships and municipalities, the use has changed and the number of visitors has drastically increased. On any given weekend, and on many weekdays too, parking areas at various access points are overflowing with visitors enjoying the trails. **Amendments to the Conservation Act must recognize the role conservation authorities play in the provision of greenspace and should be included as a core mandatory program that has funding support from the Province.**

4) Improve funding to manage conservation lands

There are costs associated with maintaining trails. Removal of fallen trees, and of trees which are in danger of falling, keeping the trails clear of branches and underbrush, mowing of grass, maintaining fences bordering adjacent neighbours, maintaining parking areas, wayfinding signage to direct visitors – all of these are required to encourage the use of the trails and to make people feel confident about getting outside to enjoy and experience nature. There is much evidence in the research literature supporting these assertions, I would be happy to share these with the reader.

The Made in Ontario Environment Plan identifies a goal of increasing the visitors to Ontario parks by 10%, although there is no timeline stated in the Plan for this goal. There are many benefits to encouraging people to use trails and I wholeheartedly support this goal. More time spent outside on the trails is a low-cost way to help reduce the risk of illness associated with chronic stress. The experience of nature is a contributor to individual and community health and wellness through its positive effects on physical, mental and social health. In addition to the health benefits, more trail users means greater support and appreciation for conservation and nature. There is good evidence emerging that providing trails also creates opportunities for local and regional economies to benefit.

Here in my neighbourhood, the funding available to LSRCA and to TRCA for land management is not sufficient to address the maintenance needs of the two large acreages mentioned above. Funding is challenged by the fact that within the Region of Durham there are five conservation authorities, a lower tax base to draw from than more densely populated neighbouring regions of Peel and York, and much larger tracts of land with many more kilometres of trails. On the one side of my road, the land is owned by the Region of Durham and managed by LSRCA, thus no land tax is paid by LSRCA, on the other side of the road the land is owned and managed by TRCA and land taxes are part of the equation. The death of white ash trees has created an enormous financial burden to both conservation authorities to remove hazardous trees close to property boundaries and where there are trails on all the lands they manage.

The increasing use of both LSRCA and TRCA properties by the public has meant increased parking in areas which were never intended for such heavy use. Welcoming visitors to the trails requires much partnership and communication amongst different user groups such as walkers, horseback riders, cyclists and skiers, with local municipalities, business owners, and oversight by conservation authority staff. TRCA has for the past twenty years invited local user groups to participate in stewardship of the trails, and an active engaged stewardship committee has contributed much to the development and maintenance of the 100+ km. trail network. LSRCA has recently re-established a stewardship committee to assist with meeting the demands of the many user groups on the lands they manage. In the past few years, trail maintenance agreements have been developed between LSRCA and TRCA

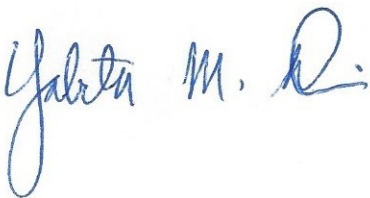
and several different volunteer groups to help maintain the trails on both large acreages. People care deeply about these lands and are willing to contribute a great deal to keeping the trails open and accessible.

Aside from challenges such as the removal of white ash trees, the funding required to maintain conservation lands for public access as a resource for health is relatively modest. But the TRCA, owner and manager of the larger acreage in my neighbourhood, is increasingly challenged to contribute any funds to maintaining the 100+ km of trails and to keeping them open for public use because of inadequate funding for land care from the Region of Durham.

Since 2007, Green Durham Association (www.greendurham.ca), the charitable organization I chair, has contributed \$20,000 yearly towards assisting with management of the 3780 acres with 100+ km of trails on TRCA lands. In recent years these funds have gone entirely to maintenance (mostly mowing of grass), there is now not enough funding to continue to partner on larger projects such as signage and other improvements which will enhance public access. \$20,000 is a large amount of money for a small organization to contribute on a yearly basis, but not a large sum when compared to costs of maintaining other kinds of recreational resources such as public arenas, swimming pools and baseball diamonds, and over the longer term, the burden on our health care system of treatment of chronic diseases and mental illness. **The provision of greenspace and the funding required to deliver this should be a core mandate of conservation authorities.**

The Made in Ontario Environment Plan and the Environmental Registry posting #013-5018 both mention consultation and engagement with various stakeholder groups and the public to incorporate valuable insights and ensure actions reflect the needs of Ontarians. To date I am not aware of any opportunities in my community or region to participate in this important consultation process. I would be pleased to do so, please add my name to the contact lists of any such meeting opportunities. In the meantime, I thank you for the opportunity to submit my comments.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Elizabeth M. Calvin". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'E'.

Elizabeth Calvin RN BScN MPH

Phone: 905-649-1113

Email: elizabethcalvin1@gmail.com