

**RES.#R9/17 -**

**EVOLVING WATERSHED PLANNING AT TRCA**

**Adapting to a New Context**

Recent changes in provincial policy has elevated the importance of watershed planning in informing municipal land use decisions in the Greater Golden Horseshoe, which has implications for TRCA's watershed planning program. Staff present an update to the Regional Watershed Alliance (RWA) on these emerging changes, and discuss the potential role the RWA can play in positively influencing outcomes.

Moved by: Marcy Burchfield  
Seconded by: Deb Schulte

**WHEREAS TRCA has a long history in leading the development of watershed plans, in collaboration with community partners, to guide activities that protect, restore, and enhance watershed health;**

**WHEREAS recent changes to provincial policies of the *Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe* now require municipalities to complete watershed planning to inform land use decisions related to settlement area expansions, major developments, and planning for municipal infrastructure;**

**WHEREAS in support of these policy changes, the Province has released a watershed planning guidance document for public review on the Environmental Registry. The intent of the guidance document is to provide detailed direction on how municipalities are to undertake watershed planning to satisfy the policy requirements;**

**AND WHEREAS TRCA has been considering how to evolve its watershed planning program to adapt to a changing science, policy, and implementation context through its Next Generation Watershed Planning project, and will be reviewing and commenting on the provincial guidance document in this modern context;**

**THEREFORE LET IT BE RESOLVED THAT the Regional Watershed Alliance (RWA) be informed of these provincial changes through this report and an accompanying presentation by staff;**

**THAT TRCA staff encourages the RWA members to review the guidance document and consider submitting their own comments on the Environmental Registry to influence the development of an effective provincial watershed planning guidance document;**

**AND FURTHER THAT the RWA consider preparing for engagement activities that will be required to solicit community input into the future development and update of watershed plans as a critical component of future watershed visioning.**

**CARRIED**

## **BACKGROUND**

Conservation Authorities have a long history in watershed management, and were first established by the province of Ontario in 1946 to address concerns from grassroots communities about poor land, water, and forestry management practices that were occurring at the time. The impacts of these poor practices created significant soil loss and flooding issues, and led to cooperation between the province, municipalities, conservation groups, and practitioners to form Conservation Authorities (CAs). CAs were given a mandate to undertake programs using an integrated watershed management approach that considers natural watershed boundaries, which was recognized, even at that time, as critical in managing these issues.

Since inception, TRCA's watershed management program has included acquiring lands for conservation, prohibiting development within floodplains, and constructing flood and erosion control structures. Over the decades, TRCA programming has broadened to include, among others, terrestrial and aquatic ecosystem management, education and stewardship, outdoor recreation, protection of Oak Ridges Moraine, source water protection, groundwater management, environmental monitoring, and most recently programs that address climate change and sustainability issues.

TRCA's *Greenspace Strategy* (1989) launched the unique approach to engaging TRCA's stakeholders and communities in collaborative watershed management. To help strategically focus where efforts are needed most to protect, restore, and enhance its watersheds, TRCA has developed various generations of watershed plans in collaboration with our municipal and community partners. TRCA's watershed and waterfront committees and task forces have been instrumental in supporting development and implementation of watershed plans and watershed report cards. The Regional Watershed Alliance represents the next generation of this community voice, and TRCA will again be relying on it to understand what the communities within the watersheds would like to see achieved through the future development and update of TRCA watershed plans.

## **RATIONALE**

In 2015, the Province began the Coordinated Land Use Planning Review, and established a process for reviewing four provincial land use plans that work together to manage growth, build complete communities, curb sprawl and protect the natural environment. These plans included: the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, the Greenbelt Plan, the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan and the Niagara Escarpment Plan. Following this review, in May 2017, the Province released amended plans, which included updated policies that considered the input of Ontario residents through an extensive consultation process.

While there were many important policy changes made, one notable change included requiring that municipalities complete watershed planning before planning settlement area expansions, infrastructure or major developments that could affect those watersheds. This change emphasized the importance of watershed planning in informing municipal land use decisions, and provided a rationale for TRCA to review its watershed planning program to better suit the emerging needs of its municipal partners. In anticipation of these policy changes, TRCA has undertaken the Next Generation of Watershed Planning project to examine how TRCA should evolve its watershed planning program to adapt to the changing science, policy, and implementation context TRCA has experienced since the last generation of its watershed plans (circa 2007-2010). TRCA has been piloting some of this new thinking through the development of a watershed plan that is currently underway for the Carruthers Creek in Durham region. Updates to natural heritage system planning to better consider climate vulnerabilities and ecological connectivity, and green infrastructure planning for improved community resilience are a few examples of new concepts being considered.

Since the release of the amended provincial plans, on February 6, 2018, the Province has also released a watershed planning guidance document for a 60-day review period on the Environmental Registry. *Watershed Planning in Ontario: Guidance for Land Use Planning Authorities*, available at ([http://www.downloads.ene.gov.on.ca/envision/env\\_reg/er/documents/2018/013-1817\\_DraftGuidance.pdf](http://www.downloads.ene.gov.on.ca/envision/env_reg/er/documents/2018/013-1817_DraftGuidance.pdf)), is intended to provide more detailed direction to municipalities, and their Conservation Authority partners, on how watershed planning should be undertaken in order to satisfy the provincial requirements. While TRCA staff are still in the process of reviewing the document, some preliminary observations include:

- the draft document provides good guidance on the watershed planning process, but little guidance on the technical approaches that will be needed (e.g. how to delineate certain features);
- there is little guidance on how municipalities can conform quickly for the current round of Official Plan reviews and updates;
- there is allowance for equivalency, but the wording is confusing and suggests that watershed plans may be the only equivalent document allowed;
- there is a section on transition provisions, but there is no guidance provided in this regard;
- the document recognizes the experience that CAs have in watershed planning and that they can be valuable partners in planning and implementation efforts, especially beyond the scope of land use policy direction. However, there is no requirement for CAs to lead or even be involved in their development.

#### **DETAILS OF WORK TO BE DONE**

The Environmental Registry posting closes on April 7, 2018. TRCA staff will continue to review the MOECC Watershed Planning Guidance document and will be taking draft comments to the Authority meeting in March. Staff encourages RWA members to read the board report to understand the issues and submit comments on behalf of their respective affiliations.

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