

LAND USE COUNCIL

"advocating social, economic and environmental balance in government legislation affecting land"

OPEN LETTER TO MNR MINISTER CANSFIELD

December 1, 2009

The Honorable Donna Cansfield, Minister
Ministry of Natural Resources
Room 6630, Whitney Block
99 Wellesley Street, West
Toronto, Ontario, M7A 1W3

Minister: **Re. Conservation Authorities**

In its August 18/09 registered letter directed to your attention the Land use Council (LUC) listed a number of concerns relating to Ontario's Species at Risk Act (ESA 2007). Acknowledgement of that communication was specifically requested but our records indicate a response has not, in the intervening three months, ever been received.

Leaving aside what unanswered correspondence says about good manners and common courtesy, we focus today on growing public unease with excessive power and inflated costs of district Conservation Authorities. Each of those two core issues is highlighted in the following summations.

1. Contrary to a soothing press release recently issued by the Ottonabee Regional Conservation Authority (ORCA), the related issues of natural justice and no clemency for a 90 year old World War II veteran, in the matter of Mr. Cliff Tripp's private land have **not** been resolved. Instead, an environmental study has confirmed, as expected, his property does not pose a threat to an adjacent wetland. No matter! ORCA has extracted a \$300.00 fine from Mr. Tripp while his property continues to be embargoed against development of any kind, thanks to steadfast ORCA refusal to allow issuance of municipal building permits thereon. With respect, Madam Minister, we strongly urge your personal review and intervention in this shameful display of CA inflexibility and bureaucratic insensitivity.
2. Behind the façade of universal support for CA municipal levies and assorted charges lurks the smoldering resentment of many municipal officials which is fueled by staggering increases in those costs as unilaterally imposed by several CA's. In the eyes of an over-taxed, over-regulated public such assessments seem less associated with watershed protection than with CA efforts to protect their own land planning empire exclusive of trained municipal staff already assigned to that responsibility. Apart from duplication and bloated costs of multi-level planning, the impact of CA spiraling fees compounded by escalating CA municipal service charges on house prices is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in published comments of Essa Township Mayor David Guergis. Responding to Editor Tony Velti's article in the November 18 edition of the New Tecumseh Free Press Online, his observations will find, in our view, a concerned and sympathetic audience among other municipalities in Ontario. Meanwhile, they are enclosed below for your interest and information as a Page 3 "Addendum" to this letter

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However commendable its intent and objectives, it would appear the Conservation Act is currently being demeaned by indefensible cost increases made worse, in some instances, by questionable tactics of at least several district Authorities. Since the incumbent provincial government, including your Ministry and its related sub-agencies, never tire of promising accountability and transparency, we urge your full and public endorsement of a transparently independent investigation into local tensions, ballooning costs and failed public relations now attributed to some CA's in Ontario.

When defending against allegations of poor public relations and fiscal volatility, most bureaucratic tribunals prefer to conduct internal reviews while strongly resisting public ones. However, given present realities, anything less than a completely independent, non-partisan examination of the performance, cost and behavior of some district CA's would, we submit, likely yield a report lacking in objectivity and credibility and hence offering no real prospect of long term improvement.

We ask and will appreciate a response to this as well as to previous LUC correspondence at your earliest convenience.

Yours truly

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The Land Use Council is a public service consortium sponsored by the combined memberships of:

**Food Chain / Halton Region Federation of Agriculture / Ontario Landowners Association
Ontario Property and Environmental Rights Alliance / Peel District Federation of Agriculture**

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ADDENDUM

VERBATIM NOVEMBER 21, 2009 E-MAIL MESSAGE

FROM: Essa Township Mayor David Guergis
TO: Mr. Tony Veltri, Editor, New Tecumseh Free Press On Line
RE: Nottawasaga Regional Conservation Authority (ORCA)

Hi Tony...Just read your story regarding New Tecumseh and NVCA. Should the \$627,000 identified in your story not be enough to fund the whole NVCA planning dept. What are we thinking about? The \$370,000 paid to review one development is crazy. What would it take to review that proposal, 20 or 30 hours, you can do the math (\$ per hour). Now, who ends up paying? The purchasers of those homes and once they move in they can start contributing to the other \$226,000 levy through their property tax.

I ask your readers to go online and check out the Severn Sound Environmental Association providing the same legislated service to our northern neighbors at a fraction of the price. They run the whole service (PPS, CA Act) for just a little bit more than what the NVCA will get out of New Tecumseh this year. Some examples of their levies are Orillia \$26,000, Severn \$19,000, Penetang \$17,000 and they don't have the crazy permit fees.

Is it not our job as elected officials to provide quality services at the best price? In Essa our CA levy has increased 249.8% since the year 2000. If any of our other departments had increases like that heads would roll. Why does the CA get a pass? And as the economy slows the CA's are not getting the outrageous permit fees they used to so I ask where will the short fall be made up? New restrictions with new fees and increased levies?

While I have withdrawn my original motion asking that the Authority become an Association I still know it is the right thing to do and I would ask the ratepayers who are funding these massive increases to call their local municipal rep and ask them to at least make an effort to look at the high quality service being provided to our northern neighbors at a much, much lower cost. Now as for the potential savings at my municipality I would be asking my council to put that money towards real projects to fix our water shed (erosion, log jams, better tree coverage etc.). When you look at the NVCA budget almost nothing goes to environmental repair (almost 2.5 million in wages alone).

Most folks do not know that I am a former board member of the NVCA and was there when in the 90s they ran a deficit of \$160,000 + and there was talk of getting rid of them altogether and I was the loudest voice in the room to keep them alive. I supported them because they swore to not empire build and to reduce costs, I was even approached to sit on the executive but declined because I have seen too many good reps fall under the spell of the CA. As a matter of fact the guy who was arguing to get rid of them back then later became the board chair and now supports anything they do (deficits, levy increases, etc.)

In these economic times we need to reduce taxes. We must push our respective councils to support an independent review, 249.8% increases have to be justified. I thank Mulmur, Oro-Medonte, Melancthon and my own council in Essa for supporting the review. It is on the agenda of other councils and will be dealt with soon so I encourage your readers to call their councillors asap to support the independent review.

Dave