ONTARIO'S NEW CONSERVATION AUTHORITIES ACT

On December 8, 2020 Ontario Passed Bill 229, the Budget Measures Act including the controversial Schedule 6 which altered the Conservation Authorities Act, despite widespread opposition to the environmental changes by numerous conservation authorities, municipal councils, environmental organizations, as well as Conservation Ontario, Big City Mayors, Association of Municipalities of Ontario, Ontario Farmers Association and thousands of residents raising concerns and asking for Ontario to remove Schedule 6 from the budget bill.

The provincial government could have passed a budget bill about financial recovery from pandemic conditions without adversely impacting Ontario’s highly successful watershed management model and undermining the importance of conservation authorities. Conservation authorities, including our local Cataraqui Region Conservation Authority formed in 1964, have protected life, property and watershed resources for up to 75 years and have worked productively and cooperatively with all levels of government.

The new law enables the Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing to unilaterally issue ‘Minister’s Zoning Orders’ (MZOs) requiring a conservation authority to issue a permit for a development in sensitive areas such as a wetland, even if it goes against their mandate, the public interest, and the application of sound scientific principles for watershed management. The new law restricts the scope of appeals that conservation authorities can bring to the Local Planning Appeal Tribunal (LPAT) and makes a number of other changes that limits the role and important work of conservation authorities.

Now more than ever, where the expertise of conservation authorities is needed to assist municipalities and promote sustainable development and community growth with safeguards for protecting a healthy natural environment, their viability and function is being seriously threatened and needlessly gutted. Ontario’s focus for a post-pandemic society should be on ensuring robust local planning and decisionmaking processes, enabling our science-based institutions, employing proper checks and balances, and supporting public participation in determining the future of our farmlands, forests, wetlands, and other valued areas and natural resources.

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