

Developing a Municipal Charter for Watershed Security

Ontario municipalities deliver core services that impact our watersheds, such as those related to land use planning and the management of drinking water, storm water, and sanitary sewage systems.

This is recognized in a clarion manner in the Provincial Planning Statement, which states that planning authorities “shall protect, improve, or restore the quality and quantity of water by ... using the watershed as the ecologically meaningful scale for integrated and long-term planning, which can be a foundation for considering cumulative impacts of development”.

The Provincial Planning Statement (PPS) also requires a municipality to minimize the potential negative impacts of planning on water, including cross-jurisdictional and cross-watershed impacts.

Unfortunately, the ecological integrity and biodiversity of our watersheds are threatened, especially in South-central Ontario, due to the inadequate implementation of the PPS.

Threats include diminished and fragmented natural heritage, increased flow from hardened surfaces, pollution (including from road salt), and impacts from climate change that include increased temperature and alterations to both the hydrologic cycle and the chemical composition of precipitation.

Given the directives of the PPS, the threats facing Ontario’s watersheds and their biodiversity, and growing population and development pressures, the Ontario Headwaters Institute considers it fundamentally important that our municipalities integrate land use and watershed planning.

We suggest that they develop a Municipal Charter for Watershed Security – defined as a healthy and resilient watershed to ensure regional ecological integrity, social wellbeing, and economic vitality - based on the following eight actions:

- Adopting a council motion to integrate land use and watershed planning;
- Committing to a whole watershed approach, seeking normal flows of clean water entering the municipality from areas upstream as well as to assure the same for communities downstream;
- Using aquatic and terrestrial studies to identify and protect key ecological features and functions;
- Directing early efforts in key municipal departments, such as economic development, permitting, transportation, and works, to integrate their responsibilities for land use and watershed planning, including the consideration of climate change and the need to protect biodiversity;
- Establishing watershed and/or sub-watershed targets, including restoration targets where needed, for areas in natural heritage, wetlands, streamside vegetation, and urban canopies;
- Ensuring before and after terrestrial and aquatic monitoring of significant developments, including infrastructure projects, as identified in a municipal protocol;
- Using watershed reports and applying adaptive management to redress poor conditions in the watershed; and,
- Encouraging sound stewardship practices on all land in the municipality.

The OHI offers these suggested actions so that municipalities can address local priorities and resources in a practical and flexible manner. We also suggest that many aspects related to the development and successful implementation of a charter would benefit from broad community engagement. We are available to discuss the development of a local Charter with any municipality at its convenience.