

Recommendations for Municipalities: April 22, 2025
Integrating Land Use and Watershed Planning
Through a Municipal Charter for Watershed Security

Ontario municipalities deliver core services that impact watershed security, which we define as healthy and resilient watersheds that protect regional ecological integrity, social wellbeing, and economic vitality. These core services include 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, directing 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, changes to the mandates of conservation authorities, and the rollback of other environmental safeguards due mostly to the Housing Action Plan.

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, gaps in the provincial framework for planning, growing population and development pressures, and the climate and biodiversity crises, the Ontario Headwaters Institute considers it fundamentally important that our municipalities integrate land use and watershed planning. We suggest they address the current challenge through the following eight actions to:

- Endorse the OHI Municipal Charter, draft something similar, and/or pass a council motion to integrate land use and watershed planning;
- Commit 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;
- Use aquatic and terrestrial studies to identify and protect key ecological features and functions;
- Direct 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;
- Establish watershed and/or sub-watershed targets, including restoration targets where needed, for areas in natural heritage, wetlands, streamside vegetation, and urban canopies;
- Ensure before and after terrestrial and aquatic monitoring of significant developments, including infrastructure projects, as identified in a municipal protocol;
- Implement watershed monitor and apply adaptive management to redress poor conditions in the watershed; and,
- Encourage 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 or implementation of a local charter with any municipality at its convenience.