

The Municipal Lens for Watershed Security

The Need to Integrate Land Use and Watershed Planning

Ontario municipalities deliver core services that impact watershed security. These services include land use planning and the management of drinking water, storm water, and sanitary sewage, while the OHI defines watershed security as healthy and resilient watersheds that protect regional ecological integrity, social wellbeing, and economic vitality.

A key document on these issues is the Provincial Planning Statement, which directs that planning authorities such as municipalities “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, Ontario has over the last few years subverted the vision of the PPS with actions meant to address the housing crisis.

As a result, the ecological integrity and biodiversity of our watersheds are being threatened, especially in South-Central Ontario, and it is now more important than ever for municipalities to implement a strategic framework to integrate land use and watershed planning.

The OHI therefore recommends the following nine practical actions for municipalities to integrate land use and watershed planning, honouring their duty to protect local watersheds without compromising efforts to address the housing crisis.

1. Adopt a council motion to integrate land use and watershed planning;
2. Consider developing a Municipal Charter for Watershed Security, embracing the ecosystem approach to local planning;
3. Identify early efforts in key municipal departments on how to integrate their responsibilities for land use and watershed planning, including the consideration of climate change and the need to protect biodiversity;
4. Maintain up-to-date current condition reports on the health of local watersheds;
5. Establish targets for watershed and sub-watershed health, including for areas in natural heritage, agriculture, wetlands, streamside vegetation, and urban canopies, with restoration targets where needed;
6. Require aquatic and terrestrial studies to identify and protect key ecological features and functions with respect to proposed development and conduct follow-up monitoring;
7. Apply adaptive management to redress unacceptable conditions documented in monitoring reports;
8. Encourage sound stewardship practices on all land in the municipality; and,
9. Work collaboratively, with other municipalities and relevant agencies, to enlarge or create new Greenbelt-style core and corridor natural heritage and agricultural areas as a counter-balance to the extensive land conversion now taking place across South-central Ontario.

These additional special planning areas could constitute a multi-generational commitment to protect our water, natural heritage, and food security while reducing environmental risks and their cost. They would also be logical locations to implement nature-based solutions to address the climate and biodiversity crises.

The OHI is working to develop tools to help municipalities address the actions suggested above and notes that each would benefit from community engagement. Please contact Andrew McCammon, our Executive Director, for further information via andrew@ontarioheadwaters.ca or at 416 231 9484.

