

# NOVÆ RES URBIS

## GREATER TORONTO & HAMILTON AREA

2 **NEW HEIGHTS**  
Filling in the gap

3 **MILTON GROWS**  
Transit coming

WEDNESDAY,  
FEBRUARY 13, 2019

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No. 7



DELTA URBAN

### ■ MAINTAINING FUNDING LEVELS

# INVESTING IN RESILIENCY

**Rachael Williams**

**W**ith the province gutting environmental programs and promoting austerity to balance the budget, conservation authorities are wary of provincial funding cuts.

In its pre-budget submission to the province, **Conservation Ontario** has requested that the provincial government continue to support the programs administered by the 36 conservation authorities in Ontario to mitigate the impacts of climate change and protect public health. These programs include flood management, water and erosion control, drinking water and natural heritage protection, watershed stewardship and technical support for land use planning.

“We didn’t ask for additional funding this year. We wanted to respect the government’s goal of trying to reduce its debt, so what we did is identified to the government that we’d like to maintain the current funding that we get,” said **Conservation**

**Ontario** general manager **Kim Gavine**.

The province currently provides annual transfer payments of \$7.4-million for natural hazards work including flooding and erosion, \$5-million in matching funding to address flood infrastructure issues, and a further \$7.2-million under the Ontario Drinking Water Source Protection program to protect sources of drinking water. This accounts for roughly 9 per cent of funding and is spread out among 36 different authorities. Municipal levies (54 per cent), self-generated revenue (34 per cent) and federal grants or contracts (3 per cent) account for the remaining portions.

“It used to be the province funded a fair bit of what the conservation authorities were responsible for and then they just cut that way back which means conservation authorities had to find other means of operating,” said **Ontario** **Nature** conservation and

education director **Anne Bell**.

Under the leadership of former Ontario Premier **Mike Harris**, amendments to the *Conservation Authorities Act* made in 1995 reduced provincial operating grants by \$7.4-million per year, a 42 per cent reduction. Provincial capital grants were also phased out. This led to conservation authorities having to reduce their staff between 20 and 60 per cent, according to the **Canadian Institute for**

**Environmental Law and Policy**. Although there have been increases in investment for conservation authority programming since the Harris government’s claw backs, municipalities have been shouldering most of the costs.

“In previous pre-budget submissions to the province, we have pleaded our case that additional funding is needed,” said Gavine.

CONTINUED PAGE 7 ■

Concept rendering for United Burlington Retail Portfolio’s proposal for 5353 Lakeshore Road, Burlington. See Halton agendas on page 9.

SOURCE: MHBC



# INVESTING IN RESILIENCY

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

For example, Gavine explained Conservation Ontario received \$7.4-million for flood operations in 2015, but estimated the real cost of doing flood operations is approximately \$63.5-million per year. Conservation Ontario also owns and operates \$2.7-billion worth of infrastructure, yet receives only \$5-million from the province, which is matched municipally, to work towards repairing that infrastructure.

Updated flood plain mapping is also a priority

for Conservation Ontario, as many conservation authorities have older maps that do not adequately capture the newer flood events as conditions change. Gavine told *NRU* these maps need to be updated, but the cost is estimated to be \$136-million, far beyond what conservation authorities can afford.

“I think it would be reasonable to be worried about funding for conservation programs in Ontario,” said **Environmental Defence**

clean economy program manager **Sarah Buchanan**. “I think having seen how much funding has been cut from environmental programs in Ontario, I think most people out there taking action on climate change who are funded provincially are probably worried with this upcoming budget.”

Since being elected on June 7, the province has scrapped the cap and trade program aimed to lower greenhouse gas emissions, cancelled the Green Ontario Fund that offered thousands in rebates to homeowners who completed energy-efficiency renovations and abolished the Office of the Environmental Commissioner.

In a recent **Ernst & Young**

report commissioned by the province analyzing provincial government expenditures from 2002 to 2017, the authors noted total government expenditure for the 15-year period has grown from \$95-billion to \$144-billion, with transfer payments growing by \$46.3-billion. Transfer payments are made to school boards, universities and colleges, LHINs and hospitals, social service agencies and conservation authorities and are expected to be reduced in the 2019 provincial budget.

“That money that we get from the province is in the form of transfer payments, so I know they’re looking at all transfer payments,” noted Gavine. “We

CONTINUED PAGE 8

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# INVESTING IN RESILIENCY

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7

want to be able to work with the current government in reducing their deficit, but we are requesting that they at least maintain the current budget levels. We want them to embrace and support conservation authorities as on the ground environmental delivery agents for the people of Ontario.”

## Ontario Headwaters

**Institute** executive director **Andrew McCammon** said that Conservation Ontario’s request to maintain current funding levels for work on natural hazards and source protection was “overly reasonable, especially given a changing climate and increasing population.”

“The OHI supports the request for at least two years of funding, but we suggest a broader dialogue for longer-term program delivery, with increased reporting and transparency from conservation authorities and source protection agencies,” he said.

With climate change and more frequent weather events inflicting severe damage on the environment and infrastructure, the role of conservation authorities is becoming increasingly important. These local watershed organizations help with flood management and erosion through planning services, flood forecast and warning,

and flood infrastructure management. They also help municipalities, communities and landowners build resilience through wetland restoration, management of invasive species, implementation of rural water quality programs, stormwater management, low-impact development and green infrastructure.

“The [provincial government] talks about local solutions and evidence-based solutions, well if that’s what they really want, they need to invest in conservation authorities,” Bell said.

Additionally, one of the pillars in the province’s new Environmental Plan released in January is the protection and restoration of lakes, waterways and groundwater. The Environmental Plan also touches on the need to enhance resiliency and mitigate the impacts of climate change.

“Conservation authorities are perfectly positioned for that work. They know where the hazard lands are, they know where the wetlands are, they’ve done the mapping, they’ve done the assessments, so let’s make sure we use this local knowledge and that we do indeed work to make ourselves more resilient,” Bell said.

The 2019 provincial budget is expected to be released this spring. 🌱

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