

Responses to Questions posed in ERO Posting 025-1257

What do you see as key factors to support a successful transition and outcome of regional conservation authority consolidation?

- Consideration of consolidation should be paused to allow for a measured approach with meaningful engagement. Engagement should include
 - a cost benefit analysis of alternative consolidation models that could have better outcomes such as:
 - the consolidation on a smaller more effective scale and size of two neighboring conservation authorities having similar watershed conditions, such as CLOCA and Ganaraska Region Conservation Authority. This would still result in efficiencies and capacity building but would limit service disruptions and maintain local autonomy and relationships.
 - consolidation of only those conservation authorities that don't have the capacity to undertake critical natural hazard management programs
 - consolidation of one or two conservation authorities as a case study prior to implementing consolidation province wide
 - using a voluntary consolidation process similar to the public health unit consolidation process that involved an expert panel to examine challenges and make recommendations regarding organizational structure, governance and integration.
 - Establishment of regional conservation authority service corporations that could be separate not-for-profit corporations which could provide regional wide corporate service functions such as finance, IT, and HR support.
- Maintain local governance, autonomy, accountability and local relationships by:
 - maintaining existing conservation authority administration offices staff to ensure accessibility, effective customer service and continuity, local science-based decision-making, deep knowledge of local properties, issues and preservation of staff relationships with local municipalities and stakeholders.
 - Retaining the responsibility for planning advice (development planning) and regulation administration, including permit decisions with staff in local administration offices and local boards where local expertise exists, and informed decisions can be made.
 - maintaining local watershed boards that would provide advice and recommendations to regional boards on matters related to budgeting, and the provision of program and services that meet the needs of the local community, including oversight of local development planning and regulation matters
- Province must fund all costs associated with consolidation. The cost of implementing consolidation not be financed by diverting funding away from the implementation of critical watershed management programs and services.
- The OPCA must provide:
 - a transition plan that includes guidance from experts having experience in consolidations.
 - a communication plan that proves information to all stakeholders on the transition process and any changes in governance and responsibilities

- Consideration must be given to protecting watershed reserves and land assets. Protective measures are required to ensure that conservation authority resources and assets are maintained as intended, such as land donations that include an agreement that the property will remain in the ownership of the current named conservation authority. The Conservation Authorities Act should include a reference that the current entities (i.e. Central Lake Ontario Conservation Authority) are continued under the new name of the consolidated conservation authority.
- The *Conservation Authorities Act* should be amended to remove the provision allowing for the dissolution of conservation authorities. The proposed changes may not be well received by some municipalities and consolidation must not result in a loss of the important watershed management services.
- Restore conservation ability to provide land use planning natural heritage technical advice to municipal partners based on a willing municipality model. This will support faster development approvals.
- Ensure consolidation transition timing aligns with the necessary budgeting consultations between conservation authorities and municipalities.
- The OPCA has the ability to levy funding from conservation authorities. Levying conservation authorities should only occur once financial savings have been realized from the work achieved by the OPCA and the levy amount should not exceed the financial savings. The OPCA should also be accountable to the conservation authority by reporting annually on outcomes of the levy support.

What opportunities or benefits may come from a regional conservation authority framework?

NOTE: The following benefits can be achieved through OCA objects as well.

- Improved capacity of smaller conservation authorities that lack sufficient capacity to effectively carry out mandated programs. However, consolidation risks weakening well-functioning systems through administrative complexity and diluted oversight. Increasing capacity of smaller conservation authorities must not come at the cost of diminishing capacity of other conservation authorities.
- Greater consistency in policies, standards, fees and service delivery levels (OPCA can also address this). However, the object of achieving consistency must recognize the needs for some variability to address the diversity in watershed characteristics.
- Consolidation of IT systems, GIS data bases could result in economies of scale and faster and more informed decision. Implementation of universal permitting content management /GIS platform can modernize service delivery. CLOCA has developed a Conservation Authority Content Management System that is currently being used by a number of conservation authorities and could be further developed and deployed.
- Well-functioning conservation authorities have the technical knowledge and methodologies that can be leveraged across the regional conservation authorities to elevate Integrated Watershed Management programs and services in smaller conservation authority jurisdictions. This could result in more robust/consistent publicly accessible data sets across the province and reduce the development communities' reliance on high-cost consultant generated information.

However, increasing capacity of smaller conservation authorities must not come at the cost of diminishing capacity of other well-functioning conservation authorities.

- With a more consistent approach to integrated watershed management being employed across the province, conservation authorities would be best positioned to role out provincially funded conservation programs to implement high-value conservation projects that align with provincial interests (for example, increasing access to the Wetland Conservation Partnership Program and the Species Conservation Fund). This would reduce the time spent by CAs competing for available funding and instead focusing on generating significant results in faster timelines. Prioritizing CAs for this existing provincial funding would effectively increase RCA operation budgets at no additional cost to the province.

Do you have suggestions for how governance could be structured at the regional conservation authority level, including suggestions around board size, make-up and the municipal representative appointment process?

- Board membership size needs to be small enough to allow for effective deliberation and decision-making. Currently the seven conservation authorities included in the proposed eastern consolidation have a total of 85 Board Members – far too many to effectively govern.
- A tiered governance structure should be implemented. Maintenance of local boards is needed to ensure local accountability and relationships at a manageable and reasonable scale for efficient and effective representation and administration. The local board could include a higher percentage of non-elected officials than what is currently prescribed in the CA ACT and be responsible for providing advice and recommendations to a regional board on matters related to budgeting, and the provision of program and services that meet the needs of the local community, including oversight of local development planning and regulation matters. This tiered system would support greater consistency, centralized leadership, economies of scale, while enabling strong, local governance that facilitates effective and efficient watershed management.
- In such a tiered structure, consideration should be given to a regional board made up of the Chairs from the various local boards (with an appointed alternate). Consideration should be given to the allowance of one or two additional Board Members to ensure representation is commensurate with funding obligations. The regional board would be responsible for budget approval, Corporate Strategic Planning, S. 28 hearings, Corporate Services, CAO staffing decisions, policy and guidance approval, and overall governance authority.
- Maintain local municipal service agreements so that locally funded initiatives—such as land acquisition, land management, trail maintenance, restoration projects, or capital works remain under local control and not be redirected without municipal consent.
- To ensure continuity and retention of institutional knowledge of large consolidation organization, the *Conservation Authorities Act* should be amended to allow for Chairs of a regional board to set for a 2- year term with an option of another additional 2-years.

Do you have suggestions on how to maintain a transparent and consultative budgeting process across member municipalities within a regional conservation authority?

- Maintain local boards so that they can provide budgetary advice to a regional board on local watershed management needs.
- Consideration should be given to establishing upper-tier municipalities as participating municipalities under the *Conservation Authorities Act*.
- Maintain current process of transparent draft budget preparation and consultation with participating municipalities including a 5-year budget forecast.
- Requirements for annual report to be circulated to member municipalities

How can regional conservation authorities maintain and strengthen relationships with local communities and stakeholders

- Maintain existing conservation authority local boards and administrative offices to ensure community access, community connection, the application of local staff expertise, effective customer service and preservation of existing relations with local communities and stakeholders. Maintaining this form of local administration and accountability will ensure that CAs can remain nimble to address local needs quickly and effectively.
- Maintain conservation authority staff and program and service delivery at current local conservation authority offices. Local staffing resources have expert knowledge needed to make informed decisions and have important relationships with municipal staff, private landowners and local NGOs that must be maintained to ensure efficient and effective service. This approach also ensures that locally collected data is better leveraged at the local level by those most familiar with the local watersheds.
- Require conservation authorities to prepare annual reports outlining accomplishments, measurable outcomes and workplans and to share this documentation to all stakeholders.
- Local staffing resources have developed meaningful relationships with First Nations and Indigenous People in their local geographies. Maintaining local offices and staffing will allow for continued relationship building with First Nations and Indigenous Peoples under a consolidated framework.