



A2A

Algonquin to
Adirondacks
Collaborative

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A2A Vision: We envision a resilient, ecologically-interconnected landscape that sustains a full range of native wildlife and enhances people's quality of life for generations to come.

A2A Mission: We connect lands and people across the Algonquin to Adirondacks region to conserve and enhance a critical corridor for ecological integrity and resilience in eastern North America.

Algonquin to Adirondacks Collaborative response to Bill 23

To: The Standing Committee on Heritage Infrastructure and Cultural Policy
Re: Ontario's Bill 23 (More Homes Built Faster Act, 2022)

The Algonquin to Adirondacks (A2A) Collaborative is a Canadian, U.S. and First Nations organization of over 50 partners that works with scientists, policy-makers and a variety of conservation groups to protect and enhance the unique ecological features and functions of the region stretching from and encompassing Algonquin Park in Ontario and Adirondack Park in New York State. As such, we have a profound interest in legislation, such as the proposed omnibus Bill 23 (More Homes Built Faster Act, 2022), which would affect the environment and land use in the A2A region and across Ontario, and would affect the ability of the public to participate in land use planning.

Unfortunately, many of the provisions in Bill 23 are a not very subtle attempt to gut Ontario's environmental protection legislation and policies, to remove much of the oversight and input by the public, Conservation Authorities (CAs) and municipalities in the province's land planning process, and to turn the process over to developers. This massive set of proposals was not discussed by the Progressive Conservative party during the recent election campaign, so the public had no warning that the province's environment would be in such danger. Furthermore, the Bill was introduced in the

legislature without public input, and without meaningful consultation or and input from Conservation Authorities and municipalities. The Bill is currently now being hastily rammed through the legislature, again without proper consultations. The process is so rushed that many organizations do not have time to prepare adequate responses to these highly complex proposals. **This is an undemocratic process and the Bill must be withdrawn or drastically rewritten following a proper consultation process.**

SOME KEY CONCERNS

Despite the inadequate time available to evaluate the complex proposals of omnibus Bill 23, we highlight several key concerns below. In particular, we strongly object to the numerous components of the Bill that would result in damage the province's environment: its ecosystems, wetlands and biodiversity, by increasing urban sprawl, greatly reducing public input to land planning, and greatly curtailing the important role of Conservation Authorities to protect watersheds and mitigate flood damage.

(A) INADEQUATE CONSULTATIONS PROCESS FOR BILL 23:

There have not been adequate consultations with the public or with other key players on the many proposals in Bill 23, despite the dramatic nature of the proposed changes.

Therefore:

- It is critical that the government fully consult the public, Conservation Authorities and municipalities *before* the Bill proceeds further.

(B) REDUCING THE ROLE OF CONSERVATION AUTHORITIES IN WATERSHED PROTECTION AND FLOOD MITIGATION:

Conservation Authorities (CAs) play an important role in watershed protection, a role that is becoming even more critical in the current climate change emergency. We strongly oppose provisions of Bill 23 that would decrease the role of Conservation Authorities.

CAs are responsible for maintaining the low level of damage that has occurred in Ontario as a result of recent severe flooding events (compared to the much higher levels of damage that have occurred in other provinces). This is because they protect wetlands which mitigate flood and drought events, projected to become ever more common in the climate emergency we are all facing.

CAs have expertise in assessing the cumulative affects of development in a watershed. They provide this expertise to municipalities related to Planning and Development Applications. Bill 23 would eliminate or severely restrict such input. This is unacceptable and must be removed from the Bill.

Bill 23 would allow the development of lands that have been identified by CAs as environmentally important or that need to be protected because of natural hazards. This is unacceptable and must be removed from the Bill.

Conservation Authorities have expressed grave concerns with the proposals in Bill 23. The Rideau Valley Conservation Authority which operates within the A2A region has stated that the proposed changes would result in *“Weakening the regulatory ability of CAs to protect people and property from natural hazards like flooding, erosion and slope failures - leading to greater risk of property damage and public safety.”* (Rideau Valley Conservation Authority website, Nov. 10, 2022).

Conservation Halton has stated that *“While the government wants to focus CAs on their core mandate, this proposed sweeping exemption signals the exact opposite. As proposed in the legislation, the CA exclusions will nullify the core functions of CAs and open up significant holes in the delivery of our natural hazard roles, rendering them ineffective. This will negatively impact our ability to protect people and property from natural hazards, which seem to be more and more prevalent with extreme weather events.”* (Letter from Conservation Halton to the Premier and Ministers of Natural Resources and Forestry, Municipal Affairs and Housing, and Environment Conservation and Parks, Oct. 31, 2022)

The Association of Municipalities of Ontario is also concerned with the proposed changes to the Conservation Authorities Act, indicating that *“Many of the proposed amendments to the Conservation Authorities Act and the Planning Act in Bill 23 are concerning, as they signal a move away from environmental protection at a time when climate change impacts are being felt more at the local level. Bill 23 proposes sweeping changes to the regulatory responsibilities of Ontario’s 36 conservation authorities that, if passed, will undermine the collaborative and productive changes put forward by the Ministry led Conservation Authority Working Group over the past two years.”* (Ontario Association of Municipalities Ontario website, Nov. 2, 2022)

Therefore:

- The A2A Collaborative strongly oppose all provisions of Bill 23 that diminish the role of Conservation Authorities.
- The government must fully consult experts in the Conservation Authorities, must consult the province’s own multi-stakeholder Conservation Authorities Working Group, and must consult fully with the public before any changes are considered.

(C) REDUCING THE PROTECTION OF WETLANDS:

The effect of the proposed changes in Bill 23 are of particular concern with regard to Southern Ontario’s diminishing wetlands, which are critical for wildlife habitat, water

quality and flood reduction. Two thirds of Southern Ontario's wetlands (including many in the A2A region) have already been lost due to development of various kinds over many decades. The importance of protecting the remaining third has been recognized for many years.

Proposed changes in Bill 23 would alter the Ontario Wetland Evaluation System that identifies Provincially Significant Wetlands (PSWs), making it more difficult for wetlands to qualify as PSWs in the future, and resulting in the de-designation of many existing PSWs.

The proposed "offsetting" policy is also of grave concern. It is supposed to compensate for the loss of wetlands and other natural areas due to development, by recreating these features elsewhere or allowing the developer to simply pay into a compensation fund. There is no evidence that such schemes actually work. Destroyed wetlands cannot simply be recreated elsewhere.

Therefore:

- All proposals in Bill 23 that would alter the Ontario Wetland Evaluation System or otherwise affect the designation and protection of Provincially Significant wetlands must be removed.
- The government must consult with the multi-stakeholder Conservation Authorities Working Group on issues related to wetlands. The public must also be fully consulted.

(D) REDUCING PUBLIC INPUT INTO LAND PLANNING:

Public input is a necessary and important component of land use planning. Provisions of Bill 23 would limit public consultations and remove a citizen's right to appeal Official Plans and zoning changes that have a negative effect on the local environment.

Therefore:

- All provisions that reduce public input into planning processes must be removed from the Bill.

(E) INCREASING URBAN SPRAWL:

It is widely recognized that urban sprawl results in loss of forested and agricultural lands, loss of wildlife habitat, the consequent need for expanded infrastructure (roads, sewers, etc.), increased vehicular traffic and related greenhouse gases, and higher levels of pollution. Therefore, it should be avoided in favour of more dense development within existing urban boundaries. Unfortunately, many of the proposals in Bill 23 aim to open up more land to development – even valuable natural lands currently protected by Conservation Authorities.

Therefore:

- The proposals that encourage urban sprawl are entirely inappropriate given today's concerns over climate change and loss of wildlife habitat and biodiversity, and must be removed from the Bill.

(F) HOUSING DEVELOPMENTS IN THE GREENBELT:

Unfortunately, the negative effects of Bill 23 go beyond the provisions of the Bill itself. To "support the goal" of Bill 23, the Ontario Government is proposing (in ERO posting #019-6216) to amend the Greenbelt Plan (2017) in order to remove tracts of land from the Greenbelt for the purpose of building 50,000 homes. The Greenbelt is well known to contain some of the most ecologically and hydrologically significant lands in Canada, as well as some of the country's most productive farmland. The Greenbelt Plan (2017) identifies "*where urbanization should not occur in order to provide permanent protection to the agricultural land base and the ecological and hydrological features, areas and functions occurring on this landscape*" (our underlining). Five years does not amount to "permanent" protection.

Therefore:

- We strongly object to any attempt to remove lands from the Greenbelt for the purposes of housing developments, as this is inconsistent with the stated goal of the Greenbelt Plan to provide permanent protection of Greenbelt lands, and will result in urban sprawl and the resulting environmental damage described above.

SUMMARY:

We are alarmed at the many proposed provisions in Bill 23 that would result in environmental degradation, reduce the important role of Conservation Authorities in watershed protection and mitigation of flood damage, threaten Southern Ontario's remaining wetlands, and limit public participation in land use planning. **We ask that Bill 23 be withdrawn, or that all the provisions that undermine environmental protection or stifle public input to land use planning be removed from the Bill.** We also ask that a full public consultation process be carried out before any further proposals of this sort are considered.

Sincerely,



Emily Conger, Secretary

On behalf of the Executive,

Algonquin to Adirondacks Collaborative

