

MUNICIPAL NATURAL HERITAGE PLANNING: PROVINCIAL PERSPECTIVES "AN ADVOCATES PERSPECTIVE"

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INTRODUCTION

The primary test that I bring to the question of municipal land use planning in Ontario for the purpose of this discussion is: is it protecting our natural heritage and is it protecting the ecosystem functions of our natural environment? By definition, I'm not dealing here with crown lands and parks.

With some few exceptions, I have to answer the questions: is our natural heritage being protected by municipal land use planning in Ontario? Are the ecosystem functions of our natural environment being protected by municipal land use planning in Ontario? as "no". I'll outline the reasons for my concerns as I go.

make slides of these points:

Slide 1:

Biodiversity protection is poor -- from plants & aquatic species to mammals...

Slide 2:

Fractured ecosystems are becoming even more fractured -- it's a one-way route to more and more fractured for the most part; there is no process of re-integrating or reassembling ecosystems that are disturbed or eliminated

Slide 3:

Planning boundaries cut through watersheds and other ecological units. Municipal boundaries are drawn for reasons that have nothing to do with ecosystems. Even if there is protection in one municipality, it may be completely undermined by decisions made in another one. Examples would include wetlands, groundwater recharge, major forest cover, air quality and stream and river quality, to name just a few.

Slide 4:

There are almost no adequate minimum ecological standards for municipal planning: few official plans provide strong standards and the Provincial Policy Statement is a far cry from providing adequate standards. Furthermore, there is almost no monitoring; monitoring is not compulsory; even if there is monitoring; there are no benchmarks; there is no requirement or mechanism to repair damage once detected; and data bases are fragmented, often inaccessible and costly. Examples include groundwater supplies; air quality; water quality; forest species and many others.

Slide 5:

Local political "capture" by development interests is a threat

Slide 6:

Appeal decision-making is slanted to development

Slide 7:

To answer "yes" to the questions of protection of natural heritage and ecosystem functions by municipalities requires municipalities to put high importance on natural heritage protection; not all do

Slide 8:

Even those municipalities who intend high natural heritage and ecosystem protection are hard

pressed to maintain that commitment in day to day decision making

Slide 9:

Withdrawal of provincial presence in planning & "one window" provincial planning system makes much of the provincial expertise; provincial insight; provincial standards and policy inaccessible to municipalities and the public. This includes loss of direct review of planning applications in most cases by Ministry of Natural Resources; Ministry of Agriculture & Food; Ministry of Environment.

Slide 10:

Lack of local municipal resources & expertise in some cases means that now there is a financial cost that municipalities may feel they cannot afford in order to review applications and/ or to justify natural heritage and ecosystem protection

Slide 11:

Lack of sufficient incentives for natural heritage protection in face of contrary incentives -- such as development tax base; long term costs of decreased natural heritage protection and decreased ecosystem function are harder to measure and realize in municipal terms

CONCLUSION:

The obstacles to protection of natural heritage and ecosystem functions by way of, or in the face of, municipal land use planning decisions are systematic. These obstacles range from cultural: "the way things have always been done" (which for the most part does not include high protection for these values); to the expertise of the decision makers, including Ontario Municipal Board members whose backgrounds may not include environmental and natural heritage

expertise.

The land use planning reforms of the last few years have moved even more land use decision making to the local level, but with that shift in responsibility has not gone the resources to deal with ecosystem issues. Even more troubling is the institutional fracturing of ecosystems by this shift.

The almost complete lack of stated natural heritage goals and commitments by all levels of government to reach those goals, along with lack of measurement and scrutiny as to the results of land use planning decisions means that the public has no one to hold accountable for land use planning decisions that incrementally deplete our natural heritage.

The solution is an accountability system that includes these components, and an appeal and decision making system that requires ecosystem values to be given effect. These will require fundamental changes to Ontario's municipal planning approach. Otherwise there is almost no way to tell our children that Ontario's natural heritage landscape and environmental functions will not be much worse in 50 years than they are today.

TAM