

## **COMMENTS ON PROVINCIAL REVIEW OF CONSERVATION AUTHORITIES ACT**

Green Durham Association (GDA), a not for profit charitable organization, has for many years worked in close partnership with the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA), Uxbridge Township and other partners in adding to conservation land holdings, in the creation of trail and natural heritage linkages connecting conservation lands and communities, and in the stewardship of these lands. Our comments reference not only the Act but also suggest action with respect to the funding required by conservation authorities to oversee the public conservation lands they own and/or manage. Responsibilities without the necessary funding lead nowhere.

### **Trails on conservation land contribute greatly to individual and community health**

Conservation Authorities (CA) developed in the 1940's and 1950's as part of a movement to protect watersheds and other important benefits of conservation land holdings have evolved since their inception. Most of the population in Ontario now live within the jurisdiction of one of the 36 Conservation Authorities ([www.conservationontario.ca](http://www.conservationontario.ca)), and development has expanded around many of the lands which were once remote. The GTA is one of the most densely populated areas in North America.

Conservation Authorities (CA) have a significant role in the overall plan review process under the Planning Act, within the entire watershed, and beyond the lands they directly manage. The TRCA and other CA's land holdings have the potential to promote health, prevent disease and play a role in equalizing conditions for health for populations experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage. They are in an ideal position to support sustainable communities, which benefit greatly from being able to access a network of local and inter-regional trail and open space systems. There is a need to use all resources and all interventions in the service of health for the public as well as the environment.

Natural environments have a restorative effect, act as stress buffers, and can help reduce the risk of illness associated with chronic stress <sup>(1, 2)</sup>. The experience of nature is a contributor to individual and community health and wellness through its positive effects on physical, mental and social health <sup>(1, 2)</sup>. Particularly important is engagement of those who are not already accessing nature and the outdoors as part of their daily life. Only one in five adults is currently getting the minimum weekly 150 minutes of moderate physical activity recommended by the *Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines* ([www.csep.ca](http://www.csep.ca)); less than one in ten children are getting the recommended activity levels of 60 minutes per day<sup>(3)</sup>. Access to nature is especially important to those experiencing poorer health outcomes, such as people with lower socio-economic status <sup>(4)</sup>. Individuals need not engage with nature to have their health impacted; natural spaces improve air quality by reducing particulate matter and decrease noise from high traffic areas <sup>(5)</sup>. Proximity to natural spaces has also been associated with healthier births <sup>(6, 7, 8)</sup>, reduced morbidity <sup>(9, 10)</sup>, and decreased stress <sup>(11, 12)</sup> and violence <sup>(13)</sup>.

### **The Act does not reference the objective of providing public access to nature**

Given the very broad scope of Authority involvement particularly in urban and near urban areas, little is said in the Conservation Authorities Act about the object of the Act itself:

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*“The objects of an Authority are to establish and undertake in the areas it has jurisdiction, a program designed to further the conservation, restoration, development and management of natural resources other than gas, oil, coal and minerals.”*

Given the increasing recognition of not just health but also economic and tourism benefits of providing urban and near urban areas with access to nature we believe this objective is too narrow.

- We urge Government to consider broadening the object of the Act to not only further conservation of natural resources but also further the health and well-being of the population by fostering the ability of citizens and their communities to access and experience nature. This broadening should primarily focus on supporting environmentally compatible human use on those public lands owned or managed by conservation authorities.

### **Additional provincial action is required to encourage and financially support trails**

Given the importance of trails on conservation authority lands in supporting human health and providing economic and tourism benefits, as well as the fact that surveys indicate many of the trail users in the region of West Durham come from outside the Durham region, particularly from York and Toronto, it seems appropriate that some of the public funding shortfall alluded to in the sections below be covered by provincial funding from the health and tourism ministries that benefit.

The Province has many avenues beyond the Conservation Act for encouraging trails. The *Provincial Greenbelt Plan* goes into considerable detail in Section 3.3 on the importance of “maintaining and expanding the supply of publicly accessible parkland, open space and trails”. The *Moraine Plan* also calls for the establishment of a recreational trail system “to provide continuous access to travel along the entire Plan Area”. The GDA earlier this year participated in the Provincial Plan review process and made a submission which recommended changes to the *Provincial Growth, Greenbelt and Moraine Plans* aimed among other things at encouraging trail use. GDA has had a long dialogue over many years with the Province on the 3,000 – 4,000 acres of provincial land within Seaton that is slated for conservation and includes the Seaton and other trails. Future management of these lands seems to have reached a political impasse with the Region of Durham, the Province and the TRCA unable to reach agreement on how to handle the costs of administering these lands when they are transferred to the TRCA.

The GDA has also been involved with the Province regarding 1,300 acres of provincially owned land in Uxbridge that the Province acquired more than a decade ago as part of the Seaton land swap. More than 5 years ago the Province announced its intention to pass on responsibility for various parts of these lands to either Lake Simcoe or Toronto and Region Conservation Authorities. Although some negotiations have taken place, these lands which are very important from a trail/natural heritage point of view still remain in limbo and no resolution has been reached with regard to future stewardship and use. Again the impasse seems to be around which government entity should cover the costs of stewardship of these lands.

- We urge the Province to analyze and strongly consider taking action in the above mentioned areas by providing additional provincial funding to CAs, resolving cost sharing impasses between governments and CAs, and ensuring that in reviewing changes to existing provincial plans and policies that support for trails is better encouraged.

### **Additional CA funding to support community trail access to nature and safety on trails is required**

We stress that our comments are based on our experience with funding levels in west Durham: in the East and West Duffins Headwaters areas, the Uxbridge Brook and other watersheds flowing north into

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Lake Simcoe. These areas have more than 200 km of trails, 8,000 acres of public conservation land in the Moraine portion of Uxbridge alone, and include sections of the Trans Canada and Oak Ridges Moraine trails (see Appendix A). TRCA surveys and trail counts completed in 2011 indicated the area attracts more than 100,000 trail visits annually; GDA members who are neighbors to these lands have observed significant user increases since the 2011 surveys were completed.

We were delighted this summer when the Federal Government announced their intention to transfer an additional 5,200 acres of Federal lands in North Pickering and Uxbridge to the Federal Rouge Park creating a nature trail corridor linking Lake Ontario, Toronto and urban areas in Durham to the Moraine in Uxbridge. This creates significant future economic and tourism opportunities provided further funding beyond Park boundaries can be made available to better connect the Park to trails, nature corridors and communities in Uxbridge. It also reinforces the reality that given our focus in West Durham, many of the citizens who use our trails come, and will increasingly come, not from the Durham region but from nearby York and Toronto areas.

The current reality is that funding for conservation authority lands in this area does not acknowledge their valuable potential for the promotion of health. Trails require maintenance, signage, and a regular presence, all of which have been demonstrated to be important factors in encouraging people to make visits to natural areas a part of their regular activities<sup>(14, 15)</sup>. Investments in capital projects, ongoing maintenance costs, liability costs and staffing are required to fully realize the potential of these lands to improve the health of the population.

GDA members have long recognized that governments alone cannot and should not bear all of the responsibility and expense for maintaining and where appropriate enhancing community accessible conservation lands and trail systems. Over the past decade the GDA and its members (who are mostly walkers) have worked closely with conservation authorities, municipalities and other partners in the development of an overall conservation and trail plan for the area and in negotiating additions to the conservation land base. GDA has also donated some \$2 million primarily to support key land acquisition but also to better maintain existing conservation land and trail systems. GDA members have also been involved in raising funds from other organizations such as Ontario Trillium Foundation, and other community members and associations. Recently more than \$200,000 was raised by the local community including GDA members, along with significant help from the Trans Canada Trail Foundation. A historic railroad trestle was repaired, enabling the Trans Canada Trail (TCT) to enter Uxbridge via an unused rail line. An off-road connection for the TCT which exits to the south of the town was also constructed; this required the agreement of eight separate land owners.

The Oak Ridges Trail Association (ORTA) maintains many trails in this area and regularly leads hikes. GDA, as with ORTA, are primarily walkers but other user groups have also made significant contributions. The Durham Mountain Biking Association (DMBA) for example received a \$20,000 federal infrastructure grant this year, matched with \$23,000 of their own funds. More than six thousand hours of volunteer labor have built over 13 km of new mountain biking trails on TRCA lands; these along with existing trails attract biking enthusiasts from across the GTA.

The Province reduced funding to conservation authorities in the late 1990's and the TRCA's municipal partners (Toronto, Peel, York and Durham) offset most of these cuts by providing annual capital funds. However the TRCA has advised GDA that the budget dollars they will receive from Durham Region for the 3,587 hectare land holdings in Durham (apart from the 362 hectare Lake Ontario Waterfront lands which receive separate funding) is planned to be \$57,000 in 2016. The TRCA has indicated that \$309 per hectare would ideally be available to ensure that these lands are well managed, yet the funds provided by Durham Region amount to \$16 per hectare, or just 5%. This is a completely inadequate amount for annually maintaining these 3,687 hectares of land and hundreds of kilometres of trails. This amount is also a small fraction of the amount per hectare York and Peel provide the TRCA for managing comparable lands in their jurisdictions.

The TRCA has advised GDA that it was previously able to meet its primary objectives for these Durham lands by drawing from budget sources outside Durham Region, and by receiving private support in Durham from the GDA and other concerned groups. The TRCA advises us that these sources beyond Durham are no longer available. Unless additional public funds are made available it will not be possible to properly manage these lands and implement the recently approved Management Plans for them. This severe cutback of public support for conservation lands, at a time when the private interests have provided so much financial and volunteer support, is likely to send a message that private assistance does not benefit these lands. This risks making it increasingly difficult to enlist financial and volunteer support in the future.

- We strongly encourage the Region and the Province to increase the level of financial assistance aimed at maintaining and enhancing public open space and trails.

### **A further recommendation to encourage raising private funds in support of the CA's**

It has been Durham Region's past practice to contribute 40% of the cost of acquiring conservation lands. This has been much appreciated and has encouraged the private raising of funds that has enabled the TRCA with help from Ontario Heritage, the GDA and many other contributors to acquire property in the Duffins Headwaters area that could not have been afforded otherwise. It would assist greatly if this program could be restructured to include not only land acquisition costs, but be expanded to also cover annual trail maintenance and enhancement costs. An annual cap could be placed on the level of maintenance/enhancement support to contain overall expenses.

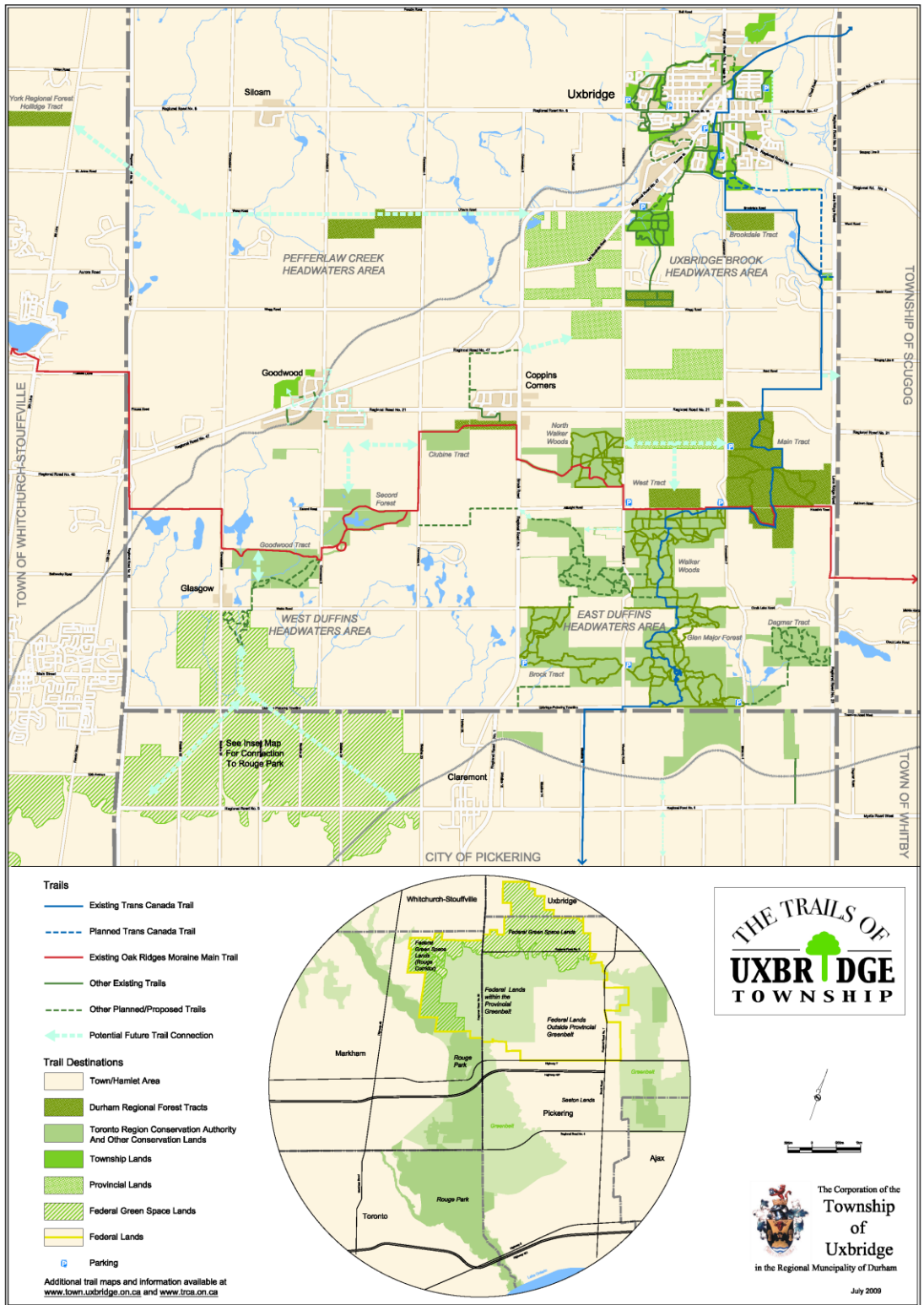
The reality is that if Conservation Authorities cannot properly maintain and improve their existing lands and associated trail systems, public support and willingness to provide financial support will erode. These lands do not lend themselves to user pay approaches since there are many uncontrolled entry points and services such as washrooms are not provided. We believe it would make far more sense to cover public land and trail use expenses by encouraging an ever-larger donor base primarily of users who appreciate these lands when they are well looked after.

- We urge Government to support the raising of private funds either by changing and expanding the existing regional program noted above so it is aimed at more than land acquisition, or by introducing a completely separate matching program to assist Conservation Authorities in increasing the funding available to maintain and care for public trails on their existing conservation lands.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of Green Durham Association

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**APPENDIX A**





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