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Strengthening Conservation Authority Effectiveness While Advancing Provincial Goals

Ontario's commitment to improving consistency and customer service in Conservation Authority permitting is an important and timely goal. These objectives can be achieved most effectively by building on the proven strengths of local Conservation Authorities (CAs), which have safeguarded watersheds and supported responsible growth for decades, at exactly the appropriate scale. Their work has helped Ontario earn global recognition for excellence in natural hazard management and sustainable development, key factors in attracting investment and ensuring communities remain safe and resilient.

By leveraging local expertise and relationships, the province can meet housing and service goals efficiently while preserving the stability and trust integral to effective watershed management. Five themes have emerged for your consideration:

1. Rural Realities and Capacity

- Rural CAs operate with lean, multi-skilled teams responsible for front-line services across large geographic areas. Regional Conservation Authorities will undermine this strength if local roles do not remain.
- Limited tax bases and broadband constraints make centralized digital solutions challenging not only to establish, but also to access from rural clients and stakeholders.
- Recruitment and retention of technical staff remain ongoing concerns, compounded by seasonal workloads. Regional or provincial resources being made available to local CAs would establish quick and consistent reviews across all CAs.
- Any transition plan should recognize the operational fragility of small authorities and prioritize stability.

Recommendation: Support rural CAs with targeted capacity-building measures, such as shared technical resources and funding for digital infrastructure, rather than restructuring that could reduce essential local jobs and positions that local community expects to be locally available and relied upon.

2. Public Safety, Hazard Management, and Technical Responsibility

- Effective hazard management depends on local watershed knowledge and rapid response capability. Local CAs are ideally positioned to watch for community specific indicators, and community regularly sees local CA boots on the ground, the most obvious return on investment for their taxpayer dollars.

- Centralizing permitting or hazard review could slow decisions (travel times for applicants and review staff in Huron-Superior Regional CA could be across 1500km in Thunder Bay context, or still an almost 400km area near Lake Huron) and weaken risk avoidance as local context is lost. Trust in the local CA review process would be impacted negatively.
- Liability concerns arise if decisions move away from local authorities.

Recommendation: Maintain local technical roles while supplementing them with regional expertise for complex cases. This hybrid approach ensures timely decisions, preserves public trust, and strengthens resilience during major flood events.

3. Local Governance, Decision Making, and Representation

- Municipal appointees provide democratic accountability and ensure decisions reflect local priorities on CA Boards. This will not be able to continue in regional CA context.
- For Saugeen Conservation, 15 member municipalities will be expecting a voice alongside 50+ other municipalities in the regional proposal, posing immense challenge, or oversimplified generalization. Diluted representation would create slower decision making.
- Existing local MOUs already deliver efficient planning and hazard services.

Recommendation: Retain local governance structures while introducing provincial service standards and performance benchmarks. This approach combines consistency with responsiveness and sustains municipal engagement.

4. Economic Fairness, Local Investment, and Asset Stewardship

- Rural municipalities cannot absorb increased costs from regional models. In event regional models do eventually offer some financial savings, that cannot come on the back of local loss of control of municipal contributions.
- SVCA assets and reserves were built through decades of local taxpayer investment. Any undermining of that trust and belief that taxpayers have put in CAs to oversee their investment for the good of their watershed will not be productive of the continued important work of CAs.
- Uncertainty generated by announcements without specifics and amalgamation proposal without a clear plan, is undermining staff confidence in their continuing role at Conservation Authorities. Sustaining Conservation Authority staffing levels relies, and will continue to rely, on staff who believe in the organization and support its goals and objectives.
- Clarity is needed on where this proposal is ultimately headed so that staffing levels and overall CA performance do not absorb short, medium, or long term impacts from ideas that may never materialize. Housing approvals, which move on real timelines rather than conceptual ones, cannot be left waiting while uncertainty plays out over the next 12 to 18 months.
- Provincial funding currently covers only about 1% of operations; local contributions drive service delivery.

Recommendation: Ensure any modernization plan respects local financial commitments and preserves control over reserves and infrastructure. Consider targeted provincial funding to offset transition costs and support workforce stability.

5. Community Partnerships, Identity, and Public Trust

- SVCA’s strong municipal relationships are long standing and depend on local stewardship.
- Consolidation risks weakening significant and established funding streams from corporations that whose giving criteria explicitly direct funds be retained locally.
- Donors, local businesses, stakeholders, municipal partners, and volunteers support the Authority because they recognize its local stewardship and identity.
- Land donations, community investment, and volunteer effort are tied to the expectation of local oversight and continued community connection.

Recommendation: Protect local identity and engagement by maintaining visible, locally rooted service delivery. Encourage regional collaboration without eroding the trust and participation that are the foundation of successful conservation programs.

In conclusion, Ontario can meet its goals for improved permitting and housing development by reinforcing, rather than replacing, the proven foundation of local Conservation Authorities.

A collaborative model that respects rural realities, responds to urban needs, protects Ontario’s long-standing public safety strengths, and builds on existing governance will create greater consistency without compromising effectiveness, local identity, or community trust. This approach strengthens the system while supporting faster, more reliable approvals.