

Proposed boundaries for the regional consolidation of Ontario's conservation authorities

[ERO#025-1257](#)

Discussion Questions ++

Submitted by: Quinte Conservation Board of Directors and staff

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Introduction

Quinte Conservation is one of 36 conservation authorities across the province of Ontario. Formed in 1947, we have spent over seven decades working with local municipalities, local watershed residents and local stakeholder groups (agriculture, environmental, special interest, etc.) to ensure that the Quinte region is protected from natural hazards, has systems in place to provide accurate and timely information and data in the event of emergencies (i.e. a flood), provide programs and services to enhance our shared goals for the watershed region and ensure responsible development to protect life and property.

Quinte Conservation's boundaries are the same as the Quinte Source Protection Area. This area includes the watersheds of the Moria, Napanee and Salmon Rivers and all of Prince Edward County. Staff provide valuable services to all municipalities in the Quinte Source Protection Area, including risk management services and consultation for local development in vulnerable areas.

The province can achieve its objectives by providing performance metrics, policy alignment, and technological support without restructuring boundaries. Effective oversight does not require dismantling watershed-based governance, which is essential for maintaining local expertise and responsiveness. Quinte Conservation consistently exceeds provincial expectations through transparent service standards, online permit dashboards, and performance reporting.

Quinte Conservation adheres to Conservation Ontario's Client Service Standards for permit reviews and planning applications. All conservation authorities operate under the same regulations, including pre-consultation requirements, application protocols, and timelines mandated by O. Reg. 686/21, which also requires annual reporting.

Over the past three years (2022–2024), Quinte Conservation issued 1,109 permits with an average turnaround of 14 days. This

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timing is well within provincial guidelines of 30 days for routine permits and 90 days for major permits. Delays typically stem from external parties such as landowners, developers, and other agencies, not conservation authorities. Provincial claims of delays in reviews by conservation authorities overlook regional differences between rural areas and the GTA.

To ensure efficiency and transparency, Quinte Conservation maintains a client service standard and offers tools such as online booking for pre-consultations, digital permit portals, interactive regulated area maps, technical checklists, and published fee schedules. Fees are locally calibrated and reflect regional economic conditions.

A uniform provincial model of consolidating conservation authorities into regions risks undermining locally informed decision-making essential for effective watershed management. Quinte Conservation's unique geology and watershed-specific risks require tailored studies and approaches. The authority actively participates in provincial working groups, shared service agreements, and initiatives to streamline processes. Our position is that issues largely stem from chronic underfunding, not organizational inefficiencies.

A successful transition and outcome of regional conservation authority consolidation must include meaningful and legally required consultation with Indigenous communities. Our watershed includes an Indigenous community, Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte, and we manage creeks and rivers that flow through their territory. To date, they have not been consulted regarding these changes. Proper engagement and fulfillment of the duty to consult are critical to respecting Indigenous rights, building trust, and ensuring that decisions reflect the interests of all communities impacted by watershed management. Without this, the transition risks overlooking important cultural, environmental, and legal considerations.

Specific to shared services, Quinte Conservation has provided engineering support to neighboring authorities, administers the WISKI Hub for 11 authorities, and collaborates directly with builders and landowners to mitigate flooding, erosion, and infrastructure risks. Our standards meet development needs while maintaining flexibility for local conditions. The regulations team is well-organized, engaging technical staff early to ensure timely reviews. Quinte Conservation follows provincially approved hearing guidelines for regulatory matters and aligns with Conservation Ontario's policies for plan review and permitting. Pre-consultation meetings and site visits further reduce uncertainty and delays.

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Quinte Conservation employs advanced technology for data management and flood risk mitigation, including the WISKI database, a widely used system across Ontario, also utilized by provincial ministries. Our leadership in flood forecasting is supported by strategic watershed positioning, which provides critical lead time for warnings. Planned enhancements include installing flow gauges on urban creeks through capital asset funding.

Significant investments have been made in GIS platforms and Open Data Hubs, offering public access to LiDAR, aerial imagery, and geospatial datasets. In collaboration with municipalities, we have completed extensive floodplain mapping projects using state-of-the-art hydrologic and hydraulic modeling. Our Open Data Hub provides real-time access to watershed data, floodplain maps, water levels, and source protection information.

The primary barrier to consistent technological capacity across conservation authorities is chronic provincial underfunding. Standardization can be achieved through targeted provincial investment in shared platforms rather than administrative reorganization. Quinte Conservation and its partners already operate sophisticated modeling tools that often exceed provincial capabilities. These tools rely on local technical expertise to ensure timely, accurate decisions. Centralization would compromise data quality, slow reviews, and weaken emergency responses during extreme weather events.

Our permitting and planning process is fully automated and streamlined, with electronic delivery to applicants and municipalities for expedited service. Staff expertise and collaboration through provincial committees ensure best practices are consistently applied. While technology is critical, effective risk management ultimately depends on experienced professionals, a strength that smaller authorities maintain through deep institutional knowledge and cooperative networks such as the WISKI Hub and regional flood forecasting groups.

Quinte Conservation underwent amalgamation in the mid-1990s, consolidating three authorities into one. Today, we deliver integrated services for 18 municipalities, including flood forecasting, planning and regulations, communication, stewardship, Bay of Quinte Remedial Action Plan monitoring, water monitoring for provincial programs, education, source water protection and enabling services supported by our municipal partners. Quinte Conservation's jurisdiction is straightforward as a result of this amalgamation provides cost efficient administrative services over a large geographical region.

Our operations already minimize duplication through centralized platforms such as OnBase, GIS, and WISKI, which streamline

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workflows and reduce redundancies. Detailed budgets and capital asset management plans are prepared annually, reviewed by municipal partners, and approved by our board of directors to ensure transparency, accountability, and efficient resource allocation.

Shared services provided by Quinte Conservation further enhance efficiency such as providing engineering support to neighboring authorities, sharing software licenses, and leveraging bulk purchasing for benefits and insurance. Eliminating local administrative functions would not guarantee savings; in fact, it could increase municipal costs if responsibilities shift to municipalities or require costly provincial services.

Local governance ensures municipal priorities are represented and aligned with watershed needs.

Centralizing administration would create a larger, costlier bureaucracy, undermining the lean, scaled model that smaller authorities rely on. Our current structure is highly efficient, with staff often performing multiple roles to maximize value for taxpayers.

Quinte Conservation operates under rigorous accountability measures. Annual reports, strategic plans, audited financial statements, and multi-year asset management plans are publicly available on our website.

Client feedback and performance reviews are integral to our service commitments, complemented by regular public engagement through open houses and consultations. Mandatory reporting under the Conservation Authorities Act, provincially mandated transition plans, and board meetings open to the public are essential to ensure transparency and compliance.

Local governance is a cornerstone of accountability. Our board of directors, comprised 100% from elected municipal officials, provides strong democratic oversight. Reducing local governance would diminish accountability and increase costs for taxpayers. With the proposed changes, local governance decisions will be lost. This proposals would remove the local voice for many of our smaller communities. For example, it would be unrealistic that all 18 of Quinte Conservation municipalities would have a seat at a new regional board. Therefore smaller muiniciapalities such as Tweed, Centre Hastings, Tyendinaga, Central Frontenac, Deseronto, Addington Highlands, Tudor and Cashel, etc. will lose their ability to make local decisions for

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their communities.

Quinte Conservation Board of Directors passed a resolution that:

- Oppose the changes outlined in the ERO regarding consolidation; and
- Oppose the formation of the Eastern Lake Ontario Regional Conservation Authority; and
- Support the broad goals of the province in achieving better outcomes.

CA Name: Quinte Conservation	
What do you see as key factors to support a successful transition and outcome of regional conservation authority consolidation?	Consolidation of conservation authority boundaries will not lead to a successful transition. The province can achieve service standards through the current 36 CA organizations by using legislative and regulatory amendments, technological solutions, and compliance checks. Local offices are the key to supporting local needs, knowledge, and expertise. This will ensure travel costs remain efficient, for both fleet and employees. Consolidation would require merging multiple IT systems, security protocols, asset databases, HR and payroll systems, GIS platforms, and finance software. The scale of integration risk is very high and could have long lasting impacts on service delivery. Conservation Authorities recognize that there is a need for standardized administrative processes, but this can be accomplished without creating instability that will certainly ensue with consolidating boundaries. It is important to recognize that there is significant risk when combining GIS data, land holding information, stewardship records, historic compliance information, permitting databases as we have experienced during the provinces transfer of property data to an

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	electronic system. The loss of data and inaccuracies in transfer of information can cause significant financial liabilities. Quinte Conservation has partnerships, funding relationships, municipal agreements and a variety of self-generated revenue streams which will be negatively impacted by forcing a consolidation model that takes away the local watershed-based approach. Aligning all budgets and reporting frameworks would be extremely challenging and could reduce local accountability. Staff uncertainty, potential job changes, and time spent on reassigning roles could disrupt operations and limit our ability to provide core mandated work in a timely fashion. Local communication initiatives are imperative to the success of messaging. Consolidated messaging will lose local relevance and make it unclear for watershed residents and impacted communities. Communities need to know where and who they can contact for watershed services, development permits, and local watershed programs. Specialized local ecological knowledge cannot easily be transferred or preserved through large-scale mergers, which could have long-term impacts on flood forecasting and warning, stewardship, development reviews, dam operations, and all operational responsibilities of Quinte Conservation. A successful transition must prioritize watershed based management and continuity of existing commitments under the Canada Ontario Agreement (COA). The Bay of Quinte is an Area of Concern (AOC) under the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement due to historical water quality issues, including excessive phosphorus loading, degraded fish and wildlife habitat and other impairments. The proposed consolidation map did not take the Bay of Quinte watershed into consideration and splits the Bay between two regions near Napanee, which may have implications for integrated management depending on how consolidation occurs. Quinte Conservation supports the Bay of Quinte Remedial Action Plan through its long-standing monitoring program, which is essential for tracking
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	progress toward delisting the Area of Concern and meeting COA objectives. To maintain the integrity of monitoring and reporting, Quinte Conservation will need to continue monitoring outside the proposed regional boundaries. Even though the Bay of Quinte is undergoing redesignation, the Phosphorus Management Plan is designed to outlive the AOC designation and will need to continue. Proper land management will ensure the Bay of Quinte remains healthy, and Quinte Conservation's programs and regulations provide this critical support. The Provincial and Federal governments have already invested significant resources into restoring the Bay of Quinte, and poor land management practices, such as inadequate oversight of regulations and weak integration with municipal planning, could reverse decades of progress. Maintaining local "boots on the ground" is essential to protecting water quality, and sustaining the benefits of our governments' investment. Quinte Conservation is recommending that the province take a pause on consolidation and use the objects and powers of the OPCA to implement standards across the network. This can be achieved without unnecessary consolidation. Provide the tools, policies and directives to the 36 conservation authorities and let us show the province that we can meet their new standards. This may also lead to voluntary mergers/amalgamations of conservation authorities that see value in the proposition. Forcing consolidation will lead to undesirable relationships between the province and the impacted parties (conservation authorities and municipalities).
What opportunities or benefits may come from a regional conservation authority framework?	Quinte Conservation sees very limited value in consolidating our watershed into a region that will have 48 municipalities, 16,000 square kilometers area (about the size of Lake Ontario) and an unknown governance structure. It is our position that consistent standards, improved investment by the province, and collaboration of resources and services can be accomplished without consolidation. With appropriate funding into conservation authorities instead of investing millions of taxpayer dollars into

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	consolidation, the province can significantly improve the funding relationship between CA's, municipalities and the province. From a corporate services perspective, one potential benefit might be the ability to share purchasing strength on few high-cost items, such as enterprise software licenses. This can be accomplished through the OPCA without consolidation. CAs already share technical expertise but can formalize these agreements to ensure transparency. Forced consolidation will increase administrative burden and reduce the capacity for on-the-ground impact. Having shared service agreements among conservation authorities could benefit regions without formal consolidation and could include: • Capacity for leveraging funding through government cost shared/grant programs; • Standardization of Commercial Forest operations, by adopting global Forest certification standards (i.e. Ontario Woodlot Association - Forest Certification Program and/or Sustainable Forest Licenses on Crown Land). • Forest Certification opens opportunities for carbon offset revenue. • Standardized parking gate system at Conservation Areas to generate revenue specifically for reinvestment into Conservation areas. • Sharing strengths amongst the collective Conservation Authorities existing professional expertise; • Greater public outreach through communications. • Streamlined legal expertise and/or resources. • Standardization of policies, procedures, compliance, HR processes, and systems.
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	Effective and transparent governance works best with smaller, focused bodies. For these reasons, the only appropriate governance model is the one we have now, local conservation authorities with direct municipal representation. Quinte Conservation represents 18 municipalities with a board of elected officials. Municipal representation from each of our 18 municipalities ensures that each member has input and a voice at every meeting. The current model of budget distribution and weighted vote for approval

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municipal representative appointment process?	ensures that this local pay for local say model is transparent and works to the benefit all our local municipalities and watershed residents. Currently municipalities support greater than 50% of the revenue for Quinte Conservation; they pay the most and should have the most say. Proportional representation based on population has been successful in the current system, but removing smaller municipalities entirely would be problematic. A new board structure should not introduce bias by favoring larger municipalities or appointments made primarily by the province. Doing so risks silencing democratic voices from smaller communities, which play a critical role in land-use planning and environmental stewardship. Their input is essential to balanced governance, protecting Ontario's resources, and maintaining watershed integrity. Local priorities could easily be overshadowed by population-dense municipalities, leading to inequitable decision-making. Appointment processes would likely become disconnected from local concerns and funding commitments, making it harder to ensure accountability. From a corporate services perspective, a regional CA framework would create serious governance challenges. Representation would need to include all municipalities, resulting in an extremely large and unwieldy board.
Do you have suggestions on how to maintain a transparent and consultative budgeting process across member municipalities within a regional conservation authority?	From a finance and budget perspective, a regional framework would create serious challenges. Budgeting would need to account for very different levy models, asset portfolios, risks, and municipal financial capacities. A consolidated budget would quickly become complex, less transparent, and less meaningful for local councils. Consultation would likely become superficial for smaller municipalities, since they would no longer have direct input into local priorities. Preparing multiple regional budget scenarios would require significant administrative resources, reducing efficiency rather than improving it.

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	A transparent budgeting process is only possible when local conservation authorities remain intact. Maintaining local staff will need to be a priority to maintain transparency and prevent loss of accountability.
How can regional conservation authorities maintain and strengthen relationships with local communities and stakeholders?	From planning and regulation, source water protection, water resources, monitoring and corporated services, strong local relationships depend on staff being visibly present in communities, municipalities, and regional projects. Large regional entities make it difficult to maintain the personal connections that encourage volunteerism, donations, stewardship partnerships, and municipal trust. Communication also needs to be tailored to local ecology, risks, and concerns, which is not possible at a regional scale. Consolidation could undermine relationships with landowners, Indigenous partners, and municipalities. Maintaining a local presence will be the most important part of any change. Watershed residents, local municipal partners, stakeholder groups rely heavily on the branding of Quinte Conservation. Any change to naming and/or branding may have an impact on the success of the OPCA and provincial government. Quinte Conservation has a strong partnership and relationship with the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte. We work together on a variety of initiatives including wetland health assessments, fish habitat projects, monitoring and stewardship initiatives that provide for a positive working relationship through the Bay of Quinte Remedial Action Plan and continue to build trust through meaningful consultation and collaboration.
What absolutely cannot be lost through the consolidation to Regional Conservation Authorities?	Responsiveness to local municipalities is critical, as is the ability to support local programming, education, and land protection initiatives. Losing any of these would significantly weaken our capacity to deliver on our mandate. Local source water

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	protection programming, water resources (dam operations, flood forecasting and warning) and planning and regulations are essential to keeping our communities safe. Local decision-making must remain intact, along with the local ecological knowledge that staff bring. Control over local levies and accountability to municipalities is essential. Staff expertise tied to specific geographies and watersheds cannot be replaced. Equally important are the networks that support our work, including local volunteers, stewardship partnerships, and relationships with Indigenous communities. The integrity of GIS, forest carbon, and land management data must be preserved. The forest carbon offset program may be affected as some private companies do not want to invest in the government agencies. Ontario's current watershed-based management system has been in place for over 75 years, and it has consistently proven successful in protecting and managing the province's natural resources. Moving away from this approach risks losing the deep local knowledge and relationships that have been critical to its success. This foundation of local knowledge and community trust absolutely cannot be lost. Any restructuring must preserve the principles that have made Ontario's conservation authorities a model for integrated resource management, such as local presence, local expertise, and strong community relationships. Without these, the effectiveness of watershed management and the protection of Ontario's natural resources are at risk.
Local concerns	Geographic and economic differences within our newly consolidated area. The newly proposed area is vast. Belleville is being grouped with Oshawa, and there are local concerns that costs could rise to match those in the Greater Toronto Area. This would place an undue burden on local municipalities and residents who operate under very different economic conditions.

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	Loss of local governance. Grouping Quinte Conservation with regions like Oshawa does not reflect the significant differences in geography, geology and watershed characteristics. Management strategies that work for urbanized areas may not be appropriate for rural mixed landscapes. Administrative capacity would be absorbed by restructuring instead of watershed protection. The Bay of Quinte is designated Area of Concern under the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement and it will require specialized management approaches to ensure that it does not degrade to historical conditions. Its ecological, cultural, and economic significance requires tailored strategies that differ from those used in other watersheds. Increased costs for IT integration, severances, harmonization of pay bands, software unification, and legal/HR processes. The Quinte region includes significant karst landscapes, which present unique local challenges for water management, groundwater protection and development planning. These characteristics differ from the proposed consolidated area and geographical areas like Oshawa, requiring specialized strategies that can not be standardized across the proposed larger grouping. Risk of losing local talent due to uncertainty, burnout, or reorganization. Loss of local expertise. Reduction in streamlined and effective customer service for planning, permitting, risk management services, stewardship, and public inquiries. Loss of trust with local municipalities who rely on efficient, personalized service. Fragmented or incomplete data during amalgamation undermines informed decision making.
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