

May 13, 2026

Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing
777 Bay St., 13th Flr.
Toronto, ON M7A 2J3

REFERENCE:

ERO 026-0302: Communal drinking water and wastewater system municipal consent requirements.

Please accept the following as Oxford County's Submission of Comments in response to the proposed changes posted for public consultation on the Environmental Registry of Ontario (ERO 026-0302).

Background

Oxford County (the County) is a two-tier municipal government located in southwestern Ontario comprised of eight area municipalities: the City of Woodstock, Town of Ingersoll, Town of Tillsonburg and the Townships of Blandford-Blenheim, East Zorra-Tavistock, Zorra, South-West Oxford and Norwich.

The County is the owner and operator of all 17 municipal drinking water systems and 11 municipal wastewater systems which includes, but is not limited to, approximately 750 km of distribution watermains, 32 water treatment plants, 42 water reservoirs/storage towers, 7 water booster stations, 63 active groundwater supply wells, 635 km of sewers and forcemains, 38 sewage pumping stations, 9 wastewater treatment plants, SCADA systems, 4 bulk water stations and a biosolids management facility.

The County holds full municipal authority and is responsible for all water and wastewater system services, including water treatment, wastewater treatment, water distribution and wastewater collection, as per Section 11(11) of the *Municipal Act, 2001*.

Overview

Oxford County recognizes the Province's objective of increasing housing supply and supporting infrastructure development; however, the County has significant concerns regarding the proposed legislative amendments that would require municipalities to provide consent for non-municipal communal water and wastewater systems where prescribed criteria are met. Municipal water and wastewater systems provide the highest level of public health protection, environmental oversight, financial accountability, and long-term operational sustainability. Existing municipal systems within Oxford County are supported by certified operators, asset management planning, preventative maintenance programs, emergency response procedures,

source water protection initiatives, and robust regulatory compliance frameworks. Private communal systems do not consistently operate under the same level of oversight or long-term accountability, increasing risks to municipalities, residents, and the environment.

Comments

Municipal Planning and Local Decision-Making

The proposed amendments would significantly limit municipal planning authority and local decision-making by requiring municipalities to provide consent where prescribed criteria are met, regardless of broader local servicing strategies, infrastructure planning objectives, watershed considerations, or long-term financial risks.

Municipalities are best positioned to evaluate whether communal servicing aligns with local growth management objectives, servicing capacity, source water protection priorities, infrastructure investments, and long-term community sustainability. Oxford County maintains that local municipalities must retain discretion in determining whether private communal systems are appropriate within their communities.

Financial and Operational Risks

The proposal introduces significant financial and operational uncertainty for municipalities. While future regulations may require reserve funds or financial assurances, municipalities remain concerned about the long-term adequacy of these instruments.

Historical experience across Ontario has demonstrated that municipalities are often ultimately relied upon to intervene when private communal systems fail or become financially unsustainable. Costs associated with emergency response, system rehabilitation, operational support, regulatory compliance, environmental remediation, and integration into municipal standards may not be fully captured through upfront securities or reserve requirements.

In addition, private communal systems may increase reliance on municipal staff expertise and technical support, creating additional pressures on operational resources and long-term servicing costs.

Public Health and Environmental Protection

Municipal systems operate under comprehensive regulatory oversight and are supported by multidisciplinary teams of certified operators, engineers, hydrogeologists, water quality professionals, and emergency response personnel. Municipal systems also maintain preventative maintenance programs, operational monitoring, emergency response plans, and mandatory reporting requirements designed to protect public and environmental health. Private communal systems may not be subject to the same level of operational oversight, monitoring, or emergency preparedness. Evidence across Ontario has shown that private systems may experience increased risk of non-compliance related to operator qualifications, maintenance practices, sampling requirements, and overall system management.

Oxford County is also concerned about the environmental risks associated with private communal servicing, including potential groundwater contamination, wastewater overflows, and insufficient long-term monitoring and remediation capacity.

Source Water Protection Considerations

Oxford County is concerned about the implications for source water protection and environmental management. Many non-municipal communal systems are not currently included within Source Protection Plans under the Clean Water Act framework. Without corresponding amendments and funding to support technical studies, inspections, policy development, and ongoing oversight, municipalities may have limited ability to manage land-based drinking water threats associated with these systems.

Expanding communal servicing may also require additional municipal staffing, technical expertise, hydrogeological assessments, and ongoing monitoring responsibilities that are not currently accounted for within existing municipal resources.

Recommendations

Should the Province proceed with the proposed framework, Oxford County recommends:

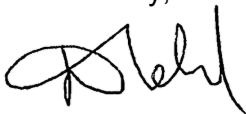
- Municipalities retain the ability to prohibit communal systems through Official Plans and servicing strategies;
- Full lifecycle financial securities and reserve requirements be established and independently verified;
- Clear requirements for long-term operational accountability, emergency response planning, asset management, and certified operational oversight be required by communal systems;
- Source water protection responsibilities and funding implications be addressed prior to implementation; and
- Additional provincial funding and technical support be provided to municipalities required to oversee or support these systems.

Conclusion

Oxford County supports continued investment in sustainable municipal infrastructure as the preferred approach to accommodating long-term residential and economic growth while protecting public health, the environment, and municipal financial sustainability.

While private communal systems may have a role in limited circumstances where municipal servicing is not feasible, the County maintains that municipalities must retain the authority to determine whether such systems align with local servicing strategies, operational capacity, environmental constraints, and long-term community planning objectives.

Yours truly,



Don Ford, BA, CMM III, C.Tech
Senior Manager, Water and Wastewater Services
Oxford County Public Works

Cc Melissa Abercrombie, P. Eng., PMP - Director of Public Works, Oxford County
Mackenzie Schultz, C. Tech, CMM III - Manager, Water and Wastewater Technical Services, Oxford County