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Briefing Note

TO: Member Municipalities' Mayors, Councillors & Chief Administrative Officers

FROM: Tim Byrne, CAO, Essex Region Conservation Authority

DATE: March 2026

SUBJECT: **Potential Implications of the Province of Ontario's Proposed Conservation Authority Consolidation**

Purpose

To provide member municipalities with an overview of the Province of Ontario's proposal to consolidate Ontario's 36 Conservation Authorities into 9 regional authorities, and to outline the potential implications of the proposed change that redefines 'participating municipalities' as upper-tier and single-tier municipalities only.

Background

On March 10, 2026, the Province announced its intention to merge ERCA with the Upper Thames River, Lower Thames Valley, and St. Clair Region Conservation Authorities to form the **Western Lake Erie Regional Conservation Authority** by early 2027.

The Province has indicated:

- Legislative amendments will be introduced in the coming months.
- Local programs and services will continue through the transition.
- Conservation areas and assets will continue to be owned and managed by conservation authorities.
- Established local expertise and relationships will be retained.

One significant proposed legislative change is that **only upper-tier and single-tier municipalities will be considered participating municipalities**. Lower-tier municipalities would no longer have formal

governance roles under this model; however, will still be expected to contribute levy funding (taxation without representation).

The Minister has also stated the province has already conducted extensive consultations and that there is a "consensus for the amalgamation and the strengthening of conservation authorities." A simple review of the 14,000 submissions to the ERO confirms that this is not the case.

Key Areas of Concern

These changes will affect how lower-tier municipalities participate in watershed planning, decision-making, and communication processes under the new regional authority.

Potential Implications for Lower-Tier Municipalities

1. Loss of Direct Governance Representation

Lower-tier municipalities, under the proposed model, will no longer have representation on the Conservation Authority Board. This could affect the ability to participate directly in strategic or budget decisions, shape watershed planning and local priorities, retain rural perspectives, and influence policy and program decisions.

2. Reduced Direct Influence Over Local Watershed and Development Issues

Local development, planning and permitting decisions require close coordination with CAs, and ERCA has worked extensively with its member municipalities for decades to provide timely solutions to ensure sustainable development can occur.

Without formal participation status, lower-tier municipalities may be concerned about how local development pressures, flood risks, and stormwater issues will be reflected, and whether priorities of smaller communities will be overshadowed by needs of larger jurisdictions.

3. Uncertainty About Communication Channels

Currently, all member municipalities work directly with ERCA staff for a wide variety of matters including planning, permitting, development, storm water management, flood messaging, project coordination, funding applications and more.

In the future, communication may need to occur via upper-tier municipalities. While the Province proposes creating *Watershed Councils* to maintain local input, no operational details are yet available, and it is likely that these Councils will serve only in an advisory capacity.

4. Service Continuity and Operational Relationships

ERCA's long-standing relationships with all municipal partners' Councils and staff have been identified as critically important, particularly in the areas of development, planning, drainage, and emergency management.

While the Province has stated that programs will continue uninterrupted during the transition and has expressed its intent to retain local expertise and relationships, these details are yet to be defined.

5. Clean Water Act and Source Protection Areas

The 19 Source Protection Areas are defined in the Clean Water Act by existing Conservation Authority boundaries. Dissolving or significantly altering conservation authority boundaries in Ontario as proposed will have a direct impact on the *Clean Water Act*, under which all municipalities have defined responsibilities.

Although not yet detailed in provincial materials, correspondence to Chair Molly Allaire from Maaz Ali, Manager of Caucus and Stakeholder Relations in the Office of the Hon. Todd J. McCarthy, in response to her direct question on this matter, states:

"Drinking water source protection will remain a core responsibility of conservation authorities following consolidation. Source protection plans, local source protection committees, municipal staff, and technical experts would continue to perform the same roles they do today. Consolidation would not change the rules or protections established under the Clean Water Act. Rather, the intent is to ensure this important work continues to be well coordinated across broader regions.

That said, the ministry recognizes that legislative or regulatory updates may be required under the Clean Water Act to align with any changes to conservation authority boundaries and to update conservation authority names where necessary. The ministry is actively considering these matters and welcomes input as this work progresses."

6. Financial Considerations

The above reference correspondence to Chair Allaire also states:

"While the governance structure for conservation authorities is changing under consolidation, the underlying funding model will remain intact. The revenue sources for conservation authorities will not change and will continue to include municipal levies, provincial funding, self-generated revenues, fee-for-service agreements, permit and user fees, and other sources such as donations.

Once consolidated, the intention is that the new participating municipalities would be levied and pay the regional conservation authorities. This will only be a difference for counties and their lower-tiers, as regional municipalities already serve as the participating municipalities for their CAs. As regions currently do, counties will now in turn determine the funding sources they will use to pay this levy (e.g., general or special property taxes collected at the local level, other fees or charges).

The province will be reviewing the regulations related to budgeting and apportionment of conservation authority costs to ensure they align with the new governance structure. Guidance will be developed to support this transition, and input on this process is welcome through the Office of the Chief Conservation Executive and the ministry.

It is also important to note that existing budgeting processes remain in place until consolidation is completed in early 2027. The Minister may issue direction to help manage the 2027 budget process. For example, to provide clarity around timelines for when draft budgets need to be prepared and consulted on with municipalities to ensure budgets and apportionments are in place when the transition to regional conservation authorities occurs in early 2027."

What We Have Been Told Will Not Change

- Local programs and services will continue during the transition.
- Conservation areas and assets remain CA-owned and managed.
- Front-line staff will be retained, and local expertise will remain accessible.
- Emergency and flood management protocols remain intact.

Next Steps

ERCA continues to value the longstanding relationships we have established with all member municipalities over the past 53 years, and we will continue to:

- Provide watershed programs and services, without interruption
- Provide regular updates as provincial legislation is introduced
- Share details on the new governance, funding, and stakeholder engagement structures as they become available
- Participate early in coordination discussions with partner CAs transitioning to the Western Lake Erie Regional Conservation Authority
- Continue to work closely with all municipalities to ensure clarity, service continuity, and support through the transition

As always, I am pleased to attend your Council meeting at your request should you wish and am always available to answer any questions that you may have and continue to be so appreciative of your support.