

A Watershed Moment for Renfrew County

By Ole Hendrickson

The County of Renfrew has released a [draft of its new Official Plan](#) as a “framework for growth and development in the County.” Among the Plan’s proposed objectives are to “maintain and enhance the quality of the natural, built and human environments in the County;” to “identify and protect renewable and non-renewable resources;” and to “ensure that development occurs in a sustainable manner, which considers the natural water systems, environmentally sensitive areas and hazard lands.”

The County will hold [seven meetings](#) from August 8 to 23 (in Cobden, Eganville, Arnprior, Calabogie, Chalk River, Barry’s Bay and Renfrew) to “engage, inform and seek input from County residents on the proposed changes to the Official Plan.”

One change of particular note is a new section on “Watershed Planning” that says: “The County encourages the protection and improvement of water quality based on a watershed planning approach.”

As noted in the new Plan, “The Ottawa River forms the entire northeastern boundary of Renfrew County, a distance of approximately 241 kilometers.” Indeed, the County lies entirely within the Ottawa River watershed. But the proposed new “Watershed Planning” section goes further, identifying and describing four major sub-watersheds in the County: the Madawaska, the Bonnechere, the “Muskrat, Indian, Westmeath”, and the “Petawawa-Barron and Upper Renfrew County.”

It then states that the Plan encourages “the protection of... features including shoreline areas, which are necessary for the ecological and hydrological integrity of the watershed; and “the regeneration of natural areas near watercourses, wetlands, and the protection of headwater areas for maintaining natural hydrological processes within a watershed.”

If this language is adopted, it should help address water quality issues that threaten property values, economic development, and recreational activities in certain parts of the County.

A focus group of agricultural and environmental groups is proposing that the Plan go further and include language referring to a “locally-led, community-based” watershed council with “a cross-section of public interests from the agricultural, recreational, environmental, residential and business sectors.” It also proposes that the County “provide full-time coordination and capacity support services to the watershed council.”

According to these groups, a watershed council with links to groups in the County’s four main sub-watersheds would represent a made-in-Renfrew County solution, more affordable than the Conservation Authorities found elsewhere in southern Ontario and potentially just as effective. It would protect our property tax base by helping maintain water quality, and facilitate access to funding from provincial and federal agencies that is often not available in Renfrew County (such as programs for liquid manure storage, controlled tile drainage, management and improvement of municipal drains, and shoreline erosion protection). It would also promote the positive aspects of our waterways for recreation and tourism, tapping into a growing trend of “active living” and outdoor adventure.

Renfrew County’s watersheds have great historical significance. The Ottawa River watershed is the homeland of the Algonquins, who lived here for millennia prior to arrival of colonists from France and

England. Our major rivers were the main means of transport of goods such as beaver pelts and timber bound for European markets. Modern Canadians fish, swim, paddle, and raft in the lakes and rivers found in our watersheds. Cottage and resort development is a major contributor to the economies of most Renfrew County municipalities.

According to the focus group, “With increasing concerns about water shortages, degraded water quality, changing levels and flows, shoreline erosion and adverse effects on property values, agricultural production and tourism, the County has a strong interest in working with all stakeholders to sustain and improve freshwater resources within its jurisdiction and has an opportunity to provide leadership in relation to this key asset.”

If you have suggestions for the proposed new “Watershed Planning” section of the Official Plan, or just want to learn more about the Plan in general, please attend one of the upcoming meetings.