

*CCCA Environmental Registry Posting 025-1257 Submission – (Dec 19/25)*

***Bill 68, Plan to Protect Ontario Act (Budget Measures), 2025***

***and***

***Proposed boundaries for the regional consolidation of Ontario's conservation  
authorities, [Environmental Registry of Ontario](#) posting #025-1257  
Catfish Creek Conservation Authority Response***

**1) What do you see as key factors to support a successful transition and outcome of regional conservation authority consolidation?**

A successful transition and outcome in regional conservation authority consolidation hinges on several interconnected factors that must be managed with strategic attention and realism. At the core is the establishment of a clear purpose and shared vision among all participating organizations. When goals are well-defined and collectively endorsed, consolidation efforts tend to be focused and cohesive. However, if early vision-setting is rushed or dominated by only a subset of partners, the result can be misaligned priorities, stakeholder resistance, and decision-making gridlock.

Strong governance and leadership are equally critical. Effective boards and executive teams can maintain momentum, provide clarity during uncertainty, and reinforce accountability. Conversely, weak governance structures, those with unclear mandates, unbalanced representation, or inconsistent oversight can exacerbate inter-organizational tensions and leave staff without clear direction. Poor leadership during consolidation risks eroding morale, slowing integration, and undermining public confidence.

A well-structured change-management approach underpins the entire process. It ensures that operational alignment, policy harmonization, and technical-system integration unfold in an orderly and predictable manner. Without such an approach, consolidations often suffer from duplicated efforts, inconsistent procedures, and costly delays. Transparent, ongoing communication with staff, municipalities, Indigenous communities, and local stakeholders is essential to prevent misinformation and maintain trust. Failure to engage these groups early and consistently can lead to confusion, perceived loss of local control, and diminished community support.

Cultural integration often underestimated, is another major determinant of success. Conservation authorities may differ significantly in their organizational norms, decision-making styles, and service philosophies. A thoughtful approach to blending these cultures promotes collaboration and reduces friction. If ignored, cultural mismatches can create internal conflict, resistance to new processes, and the loss of key personnel who feel their values or identity are being sidelined.

Human-resources planning must be clear, fair, and transparent. Staff need certainty around job roles, reporting structures, and opportunities for growth. Without careful planning, consolidation can generate anxiety, disrupt workflows, and contribute to turnover, which threatens continuity of services and the retention of institutional knowledge. Financial transparency is equally important; a consolidated organization must develop a budgeting approach that covers both ongoing operations and transition

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costs. Hidden or underestimated financial pressures can result in service cuts, strained municipal relationships, or reduced investment in core environmental programs.

Respecting local watershed identity and community relationships is fundamental to preventing service disruption and maintaining public trust. Conservation authorities are often closely tied to local environmental issues, historical partnerships, and community-based programming. Consolidation risks diluting this local presence or creating perceptions of centralization and detachment, especially if decision-making becomes more distant from watershed-level realities.

Robust data-management standards, consistent performance metrics, and harmonized regulatory processes support fairness and operational efficiency. They enable consistent service delivery across the newly formed jurisdiction. Without them, staff may rely on differing data sets, incompatible methods, or contradictory interpretations of regulations, leading to inconsistent decisions, stakeholder frustration, and potential legal challenges.

Strong risk-management practices, including contingency planning and scenario analysis, help an organization anticipate challenges such as budget overruns, system failures, or climate-related emergencies during the transition period. Weak risk planning, however, can leave the organization vulnerable to disruptions that jeopardize its credibility and ability to meet statutory responsibilities.

Building capacity for staff training, professional development, and knowledge transfer is crucial to maintaining operational resilience. Consolidation often brings new technologies and workflows that staff must quickly adapt to. Neglecting training can result in knowledge gaps, reduced service quality, and inefficiencies during the transition.

Leveraging modern technology, shared GIS platforms, digital permitting systems, and centralized information portals can streamline operations and improve collaboration. Yet technological integration is frequently one of the most complex and costly aspects of consolidation. Incompatible legacy systems, cybersecurity concerns, and insufficient IT support can impede progress and frustrate users.

Clear decision-making protocols and dispute-resolution mechanisms provide internal stability when multiple perspectives and priorities converge. Without them, disagreements may escalate, slowing progress and eroding trust among staff, partners, and board members.

Finally, consolidation must include an ongoing process of monitoring, evaluation, and adaptive management. This allows the organization to refine policies, respond to community feedback, and adjust to changing environmental conditions. However, if

monitoring is neglected or treated as a formality, the organization risks repeating early missteps, failing to meet service expectations, and losing accountability to the public and its municipal partners.

## **2) What opportunities or benefits may come from a regional conservation authority framework?**

A regional conservation authority (RCA) framework offers a wide range of opportunities and benefits by enabling truly coordinated watershed management across multiple municipalities and jurisdictions. At its strongest, this model supports environmental protection at the natural scale of ecological processes rather than political boundaries. By aligning planning, monitoring, and restoration activities across entire watersheds, RCAs can address interconnected issues such as water quality, habitat fragmentation, and hydrologic changes more effectively than individual municipalities acting independently. However, achieving this level of integration requires complex coordination, and if inter-municipal priorities conflict or data standards differ, early planning efforts may be slowed or diluted.

One of the most significant advantages of a regional framework is improved flood and stormwater management. Managing infrastructure, floodplain mapping, natural assets, and hydrologic systems holistically reduces downstream impacts and helps prevent piecemeal solutions that merely shift risk rather than reduce it. Yet, this also introduces challenges: differing municipal expectations, local political pressures, and uneven levels of pre-existing infrastructure investment can make it difficult to establish equitable cost-sharing models. Some communities may feel they are paying more than they gain, potentially leading to tensions over funding and capital priorities.

Economically, consolidation can generate efficiencies by reducing duplication of environmental services, centralizing administrative functions, standardizing procurement, and sharing specialized resources such as technical staff or monitoring equipment. These efficiencies can free funds for frontline environmental work. However, potential cost savings are not guaranteed. Transition periods often bring temporary cost increases, such as integrating IT systems, harmonizing staff compensation, or aligning policies which may strain budgets if not anticipated. Additionally, larger regional structures sometimes risk becoming less nimble, with slower decision-making or administrative overhead that offsets anticipated efficiencies.

A regional RCA framework can also strengthen policy consistency and regulatory enforcement. Uniform standards for development review, permitting, and conservation planning reduce confusion for landowners, developers, and municipalities while helping ensure environmental protection is consistent across the watershed. Yet, establishing

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uniform standards may require reducing local flexibility, which can be contentious in communities with unique landscapes, development pressures, or political priorities. The process of harmonizing formerly distinct regulatory systems can also be time-consuming, potentially delaying development approvals or generating frustration among stakeholders.

Scientific and technical capacity is another key benefit. Consolidation pools specialized expertise, hydrologists, ecologists, climate modelers, planners, GIS analysts creating a more robust and interdisciplinary technical foundation. This leads to better-informed decisions and more sophisticated watershed modeling. However, attracting and retaining highly skilled staff can be challenging if consolidation creates uncertainty about roles or if the regional authority's compensation structure cannot compete with larger municipalities or private-sector employers.

Unified structures also enhance data sharing and analysis. Standardized monitoring protocols and centralized databases strengthen evidence-based policies, improve trend detection, and support cohesive watershed-reporting systems. The downside is that integrating legacy data systems, formats, and software platforms can be complex and costly. Inconsistent historical datasets may limit comparability across regions, requiring significant effort to reconcile before meaningful analysis is possible.

The RCA model naturally encourages stronger partnerships with municipalities, Indigenous communities, NGOs, conservation groups, academic institutions, and local stakeholders. Collaboration becomes easier when engagement is coordinated at a regional scale, allowing for larger research initiatives, broader stewardship programming, and more coherent public education strategies. Nevertheless, regionalization may create concerns about loss of local identity, reduced community-level input, or less accessible staff. Indigenous partners may question whether regional systems adequately respect treaty rights, local governance structures, or place-based knowledge unless engagement is proactive and meaningful.

From a governance perspective, a regional authority can reinforce transparent decision-making through coordinated strategic planning and unified long-term capital investment strategies. This improves accountability and helps ensure that investments are prioritized based on watershed-level needs rather than political boundaries alone. Still, governance structures that become too centralized, or that do not adequately balance representation across municipalities risk creating perceptions of inequity or "dominance" by larger urban areas. If governance reforms are poorly designed, they may weaken local advocacy or reduce responsiveness to community-specific concerns.

A regional framework also expands potential funding opportunities. Larger organizations can access broader grant programs, attract multi-partner investments, and leverage

economies of scale in fundraising. However, there is a risk that smaller or rural municipalities may feel overshadowed in funding allocation, or that grant-driven priorities could divert attention from essential but less “visible” watershed work.

Finally, an RCA enhances long-term resilience to climate change by coordinating risk assessment, emergency planning, natural asset management, and resource allocation across the watershed. This integrated approach supports biodiversity, protects vulnerable ecosystems, and increases community resilience to extreme weather and flooding. Nevertheless, the success of such initiatives depends heavily on political stability, consistent funding, and the organization's ability to adapt quickly. Large regional entities may face bureaucratic delays or competing internal priorities that hinder rapid response, posing challenges in a context where climate impacts are becoming more frequent and severe.

Ultimately, a RCA framework provides a more cohesive, efficient, and future-ready model for managing natural resources at the watershed scale, but it also introduces structural, financial, and cultural challenges that must be thoughtfully addressed. When designed with clear goals, inclusive governance, strong local engagement, and careful implementation planning, the benefits can far outweigh the risks. When these elements are neglected, consolidation can generate tension, reduce service quality, or weaken the very environmental protections it aims to strengthen.

**3) 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 municipal representative appointment process?**

A well-structured governance framework for a regional conservation authority (RCA) must balance local representation, technical expertise, Indigenous involvement, and operational efficiency. It should be designed to reflect watershed realities while also ensuring that municipal, community, and ecological priorities are addressed in an equitable and accountable manner. Representation formulas can be based on watershed population, geographic distribution, watershed characteristics, municipal funding contribution, or a hybrid of these factors. This helps ensure that both densely populated urban areas and smaller rural or upper-watershed communities have an appropriate voice. Careful design is essential, as disproportionate representation either overweighting large municipalities or overprotecting small ones can undermine trust, strain decision-making, and weaken the integrity of watershed-scale planning.

To strengthen scientific, policy, and regulatory quality, optional seats may be reserved for provincial liaisons or independent environmental experts. Such roles can offer non-partisan guidance on environmental science, provincial legislation, climate projections, watershed modeling, and ecosystem restoration. While these positions are valuable,

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they must be carefully positioned to avoid perceptions of undue provincial influence or conflicts with municipal autonomy.

Incorporating advisory or voting seats for Indigenous representatives, watershed stakeholders, local agricultural organizations, landowner groups, or community members can further enhance transparency and legitimacy. Indigenous participation is particularly important, as it embeds traditional knowledge, land stewardship principles, treaty considerations, and rights-based governance into the RCA's decisions. These seats should be supported with proper engagement protocols, honoraria, and culturally appropriate governance practices to avoid tokenism and ensure meaningful involvement.

Municipal representatives should be formally nominated by their councils and serve staggered terms of two to four years, balancing continuity with periodic renewal of perspectives. A structured board orientation program is essential, covering the RCA's statutory mandate, fiduciary responsibilities, conflict-of-interest rules, environmental planning authority, long-term capital obligations, and overall governance expectations. Without this orientation, municipal delegates may struggle to separate local political pressures from their fiduciary obligation to the entire watershed. Ongoing professional development refreshers on conservation legislation, natural hazards, climate resilience, equity frameworks, and financial governance helps board members maintain informed oversight as the environmental and regulatory landscape evolves.

Leadership positions, including chair and vice-chair, should rotate on a fixed schedule (e.g., every two years) to prevent concentration of influence and ensure diverse leadership perspectives. These roles should be reinforced by clear bylaws, a robust code of conduct, transparent meeting procedures, and an independent mechanism for conduct investigations or dispute resolution. This reduces the risk of political interference, undocumented decision-making, or governance breakdowns during periods of conflict.

A system of standing committees finance and audit, planning and permitting, conservation and restoration, governance and human resources, and Indigenous engagement provides deeper oversight and allows board members to specialize in strategic areas. Committees should have written terms of reference, annual work plans, and publicly accessible minutes. Regular internal reviews of committee performance and workload ensure they remain effective, balanced, and aligned with strategic priorities.

To strengthen internal accountability and operational clarity, the governance framework should include:

- Conflict-of-interest safeguards, including mandatory disclosure, recusal rules, and annual declarations.
- Transparent appointment and recruitment processes, especially for expert or community seats.

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- Annual board self-evaluations and peer assessments, measuring effectiveness, ethics, and strategic focus.
- Annual performance reviews of the CAO, aligned with key performance indicators and strategic-plan progress.
- Clearly defined delegations of authority, distinguishing board-level strategic decisions from operational decisions reserved for senior management, helping prevent micromanagement and governance creep.

External accountability is equally important. RCAs should provide regular reporting to municipalities, Indigenous partners, the public, and the province, including:

- Annual watershed condition reports
- Audited financial statements
- Climate risk assessments and natural hazard updates
- Strategic plan progress reports
- Capital project dashboards and budget forecasts
- Publicly accessible board and committee minutes

Such transparency promotes public trust, demonstrates responsible stewardship of funding, and ensures that stakeholders understand how decisions support long-term watershed resilience and service delivery.

A strong governance framework must also incorporate adaptive management principles. As the watershed, community expectations, climate risks, and regulatory environment evolve, the structure must remain flexible enough to adjust representation formulas, committee mandates, or decision-making protocols. Periodic third-party governance reviews can provide objective assessments and recommendations for improvement.

Taken together, this comprehensive governance model cultivates transparent, accountable, inclusive, and expertise-driven decision-making. It positions the regional conservation authority to manage complex watershed-scale priorities while maintaining a strong and respectful relationship with municipalities, Indigenous governments, local communities, and key environmental stakeholders. Ultimately, such a structure ensures that the RCA remains resilient, credible, and effective in fulfilling its environmental protection and public service mandate.

#### **4) Do you have suggestions on how to maintain a transparent and consultative budgeting process across member municipalities within a regional conservation authority?**

Maintaining a transparent and consultative budgeting process within a RCA requires proactive communication, structured multilevel engagement, standardized financial practices, and a culture of openness. A well-functioning budgeting cycle not only strengthens relationships with member municipalities but also reinforces public trust,

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demonstrates fiscal responsibility, and ensures that watershed priorities are aligned with available resources.

The process should begin with early, collaborative pre-budget consultations involving all member municipalities. This stage includes providing detailed projections of operational requirements, capital expenditures, anticipated growth pressures, inflationary impacts, regulatory changes, and emerging watershed risks. Sharing this information months before formal budget approval allows municipalities to incorporate anticipated levies into their own fiscal planning cycles. Early engagement also enables the RCA to flag emerging issues such as new provincial mandates, updated floodplain mapping standards, invasive species pressures, or climate-adaptation priorities that may significantly affect future resource needs.

Structured engagement mechanisms are essential. Regular joint meetings, financial workshops, or technical working groups provide municipal representatives with opportunities to ask questions, identify local priorities, and explore options for shared service delivery. These sessions must be inclusive, data-driven, and supported with clear explanations of cost drivers. They are also valuable for communicating why certain investments such as asset rehabilitation, hydrologic modeling, digital permitting systems, or natural infrastructure restoration are required and how they contribute to long-term community and environmental resilience. Presenting multiple scenarios or funding pathways allows municipalities to understand trade-offs and evaluate different levels of investment.

Transparency is reinforced by publishing draft budgets, detailed supporting documents, levy formulas, and clear rationales for significant changes. Making these materials publicly accessible helps reduce political uncertainty, dispel misconceptions, and provide councils, Indigenous communities, stakeholders, and residents with the information needed to assess how public funds are being used. Public consultations or open houses may further strengthen trust by allowing community members to ask questions and better understand watershed-wide challenges.

A consistent framework for cost-sharing, reserve management, asset management planning, and expenditure reporting is essential to ensure fairness and predictability. This includes:

- Clear rules for apportioning operating and capital levies
- Documentation of how reserves are built, used, and replenished
- Standardized asset lifecycle forecasting for infrastructure, equipment, and natural assets
- Comparisons of municipal contributions relative to service levels, watershed conditions, and local benefit
- Explanations of how inflation, population growth, and climate impacts influence long-term financial requirements

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Standardized financial models such as multi-year operating budgets, 10–20-year capital forecasts, and scenario-based planning create stability and allow municipalities to anticipate future commitments. These models help identify potential funding gaps early, reducing the likelihood of unexpected levy spikes or emergency capital requests.

To further strengthen transparency and performance accountability, the budget process should be tied to clear, measurable indicators. Linking financial investments to environmental outcomes, service-delivery improvements, regulatory performance, and risk-reduction metrics helps demonstrate the value of public investment. Examples include metrics related to flood-risk reduction, water-quality improvement, restoration acreage, permitting service times, or climate-resilience upgrades. When these indicators are publicly reported, they provide a concrete demonstration of how funds translate into meaningful watershed improvements.

Accessibility is equally important. Developing plain-language budget summaries, infographic-style explanations, and public-facing financial dashboards ensures that key information is comprehensible to non-specialists. This approach helps residents, Indigenous communities, community groups, and local stakeholders understand how their contributions support watershed health, natural hazard management, and conservation programming.

Finally, transparency does not end with budget approval. Maintaining confidence in the RCA's financial integrity requires ongoing, predictable communication throughout the fiscal year, including:

- Quarterly financial updates
- Mid-year budget adjustments or reallocations, with explanations
- Risk assessments identifying emerging financial pressures
- Updates on capital project progress and cost variances
- Post-year evaluations comparing planned vs. actual results
- Performance reports linking spending to outcomes

This continuous cycle of monitoring, reporting, and adjustment ensures that the budgeting process remains adaptive, accountable, and aligned with evolving watershed conditions and municipal expectations. By integrating early consultation, structured collaboration, standardized reporting, accessible communication tools, and robust performance tracking, the RCA can maintain strong fiscal stewardship and reinforce long-term confidence in its governance, financial practices, and environmental mandate.

### **5) How can regional conservation authorities maintain and strengthen relationships with local communities and stakeholders?**

RCA can maintain and strengthen relationships with local communities and stakeholders by fostering authentic engagement, transparent communication, and collaborative partnerships all grounded in local identity, cultural context, and place-based ecological knowledge. As RCAs grow in scale or transition to regional models, it

becomes even more important to ensure that communities do not feel distanced from decision-making or disconnected from their local watershed issues.

A foundational element is regular, proactive communication that responds to the unique character of each sub-watershed or municipality. Outreach must be multi-channel and locally tailored. Newsletters, social media updates, local radio interviews, community newspapers, town-hall meetings, and watershed-specific events help keep residents informed about projects, monitoring results, policy updates, and environmental trends. Tailoring communication to local conditions for example, focusing on shoreline erosion in lakefront communities or agricultural runoff concerns in rural areas ensures that messages remain relevant and grounded in lived experience. Without this customization, communication risks becoming generic or overly regional, weakening community engagement and reducing trust.

Strong relationships also depend on structured opportunities for shared decision-making. Establishing advisory committees or working groups with municipal representatives, Indigenous governments, environmental organizations, agricultural groups, developers, recreational users, and local stewardship networks ensures that governance reflects diverse and locally informed perspectives. These groups can be further localized through sub-watershed advisory panels, which allow community members to identify issues, priorities, and practices specific to their region. This structure prevents smaller communities from feeling overshadowed by larger municipalities and ensures that watershed-wide strategies incorporate local nuance.

Meaningful engagement also requires creating hands-on participation opportunities. Volunteer planting days, stream cleanups, shoreline restorations, invasive-species removals, and habitat enhancement projects help residents develop a sense of ownership and connection to their natural environment. Citizen science programs such as water-quality sampling, species monitoring, and community mapping empower residents to contribute data and deepen ecological understanding. These participatory initiatives cultivate stewardship, enhance ecological literacy, and help bridge the gap between technical watershed planning and community experience. Without such opportunities, public engagement may remain theoretical rather than tangible.

Education is another critical pillar. Place-based learning initiatives, including school partnerships, youth leadership programs, community workshops, field demonstrations, and guided watershed tours, help residents understand the local landscape and its vulnerabilities. They also highlight the distinct hydrologic, ecological, and cultural conditions within each community. This approach strengthens public awareness about flood risks, natural hazards, biodiversity, climate adaptation, and the role of conservation authorities in local protection. When done well, education fosters long-term stewardship and counters misinformation. When neglected, communities may misunderstand conservation authority responsibilities or underestimate environmental threats.

Transparency is essential for sustaining trust. Making operational information, budgets, permitting decisions, monitoring results, restoration progress, and watershed report cards, openly available demonstrates accountability. Localized reporting, such as municipality-specific dashboards or sub-watershed summaries, helps residents see how conservation actions translate into local improvements. Transparent communication about challenges such as funding limitations, regulatory changes, or climate impacts also builds credibility and prevents assumptions that decisions are made without community input.

Strong relationships also rely on responsive, two-way communication. RCAs must acknowledge community concerns quickly, follow up with clear information, and adjust programs based on feedback when appropriate. Whether responding to landowner inquiries, resolving conflicts about property impacts, or addressing local environmental issues, responsiveness sends a clear message that the authority values community knowledge and lived experience. Conversely, delayed or opaque communication can erode trust and fuel perceptions that decisions are made “from the center” without regard for local realities.

Celebrating shared successes further strengthens relationships. Publicly recognizing community champions, Indigenous leadership, youth contributions, volunteer groups, and multi-partner achievements reinforces the collaborative nature of watershed stewardship. These celebrations build momentum, inspire ongoing participation, and highlight the tangible benefits of partnership-based conservation.

Maintaining place-based identity is especially important in a regional framework. Even within a consolidated RCA, each watershed community has distinct environmental challenges, cultural histories, governance preferences, and expectations for service delivery. Respecting these differences through local service hubs, community liaisons, region-specific programming, and adaptive communication approaches—helps ensure that consolidation does not dilute local voice or identity

By prioritizing authentic engagement, grounding communication in local identity, and offering accessible avenues for direct involvement, regional conservation authorities can cultivate strong, enduring, community-based partnerships. These relationships not only enhance public trust but also strengthen resilience, improve environmental outcomes, and ensure that watershed stewardship remains rooted in the people and places it serves.

## **6) What absolutely cannot be lost through the consolidation to Regional Conservation Authorities?**

Through consolidation into Regional Conservation Authorities (RCAs), it is essential that certain core elements be preserved to ensure both ecological effectiveness and enduring community trust. Above all, local watershed autonomy and identity must remain central. Autonomy expressed through community voice, place-based decision-making, and localized operational presence is not a secondary consideration; it is the

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foundation on which conservation authorities were built. Even within a larger regional structure, each watershed carries its own history, ecological patterns, stewardship culture, and social fabric. These distinct identities must remain visible, respected, and empowered within governance systems, day-to-day operations, and public-facing programming.

Local watershed knowledge is equally critical. The ability of staff to draw on site-specific understanding of wetlands, groundwater recharge zones, flood-prone corridors, erosion hotspots, fish and wildlife habitats, agricultural drainage patterns, and culturally significant lands is what enables effective, credible, place-based management. This knowledge is rooted not only in technical training but also in decades of experience held by local staff, Indigenous communities, landowners, stewardship groups, and volunteers. Consolidation must not flatten or homogenize this expertise. Instead, the RCA must embed institutional structures such as sub-watershed teams, local offices, or community liaisons that safeguard the autonomy and integrity of local ecological knowledge.

Strong relationships with municipalities, landowners, Indigenous nations, stewardship organizations, and volunteers form the backbone of conservation success. These relationships were built over many years through trust, collaboration, conflict resolution, and consistent presence on the ground. A regional model should reinforce these relationships, not dilute them, by ensuring staff remain physically and relationally connected to local communities. Municipal partners must continue to receive tailored support that reflects their unique priorities, risks, infrastructure needs, and political environments. Without these relationships and the autonomy to nurture them, community engagement, project delivery, and environmental stewardship would be severely weakened.

Regulatory and service continuity is another cornerstone of autonomy and public confidence. Development permitting, plan review, conservation enforcement, hazard identification, watershed monitoring, and flood forecasting must remain predictable, responsive, and grounded in local conditions. Any disruption in these services risks environmental harm, development delays, and erosion of municipal trust. Preserving institutional memory, watershed-specific datasets, and decades of monitoring results ensures that the new regional structure can make decisions that are historically informed, scientifically robust, and locally accountable. This continuity supports climate resilience and protects communities from natural hazards work that cannot be done effectively without local authority and expertise.

Local identity, branding, and stewardship programming must also be preserved so that communities continue to feel ownership over their watershed and its care. This includes maintaining sub-watershed advisory groups, volunteer networks, heritage initiatives, education programs, and youth engagement activities tied to specific rivers, forests, conservation areas, and cultural sites. These programs are not peripheral; they are essential expressions of community autonomy and stewardship. When residents see

their watershed reflected in decisions, programs, and communications, they remain invested partners in conservation.

Financial accountability and transparent reporting to member municipalities remain essential components of autonomy. Clear budgeting processes, levy explanations, and spending rationales must reflect local needs, contribution patterns, and project priorities. Municipal partners need assurance that consolidation will not centralize resources at the expense of smaller or rural communities. Autonomy in financial transparency helps protect the integrity of local investments and ensures that every community sees tangible, watershed-specific outcomes from its contributions.

In essence, consolidation should be designed to enhance coordination, improve efficiency, and expand technical capacity without sacrificing the local autonomy, knowledge, relationships, and identity that define the conservation authority model. Autonomy is not an obstacle to regional coordination; it is the mechanism that ensures regional systems remain grounded in the realities of each watershed. A well-designed RCA must therefore function as a network of empowered local units operating within a cohesive regional framework.

The goal is a stronger, more capable regional system that still feels local, familiar, accessible, and responsive, where each watershed retains the authority, presence, and identity necessary to serve its communities and ecosystems effectively. Autonomy is everything: it is the anchor that keeps conservation work meaningful, trusted, and deeply rooted in the landscapes and people it exists to protect.

## **7) Local concerns**

Local communities and stakeholders often express significant concerns during consolidation discussions concerns that go far deeper than simple administrative adjustments. At the heart of these concerns is a strongly held belief that “bigger isn’t better,” especially when it comes to watershed management, environmental protection, and community relationships. Many communities value the existing conservation authority model precisely because it is local, nimble, place-based, and deeply informed by on-the-ground expertise. Consolidation threatens to disrupt this core strength.

One of the most pervasive fears is that representation will be diluted within a larger regional board. Municipalities worry their voice will become one among many, weakening their ability to influence decisions that directly affect their neighbourhoods, infrastructure, and locally significant natural areas. Smaller municipalities are especially concerned that their distinct challenges such as rural flood risks, agricultural drainage needs, shoreline erosion control, or wildlife corridor protection could be overshadowed by the priorities of larger urban centres. Under a regional lens, local nuance risks being lost, and with it, the ability to tailor responses to unique watershed conditions.

Communities also express legitimate concerns about service continuity and responsiveness. In the current system, local conservation authorities provide permitting,

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hazard monitoring, enforcement, flood forecasting, and conservation area maintenance with an understanding that is highly contextual and site-specific. Residents and municipalities alike worry that consolidation could centralize or standardize these services in ways that reduce responsiveness. They fear slower permitting decisions, delayed hazard assessments, or reduced field presence just when climate change is increasing the urgency of quick, informed action.

A major risk of consolidation is the potential loss of embedded local expertise. Existing conservation authorities rely on staff who know the watershed intimately: historical flooding patterns, aging culverts and berms, localized erosion hotspots, cumulative effects of development, long-standing landowner relationships, and ecological trends shaped over decades. This kind of place-based knowledge cannot be replicated quickly, nor can it be effectively centralized. During consolidation, staff may be reassigned, spread thin over a larger region, or even lost altogether. This creates real knowledge gaps that jeopardize environmental outcomes, risk management, and long-term watershed resilience.

Local stewardship programs and volunteer-based initiatives are also at risk. Many communities fear that the unique character of their local programs could be diluted or replaced by generic, region-wide offerings. Neighbourhood tree plantings, creek cleanups, school field trips, Indigenous land-based learning, and citizen science projects often succeed because they are tailored to the specific natural and cultural landscape. A larger regional authority may struggle to maintain program frequency, diversity, or relevance at the local scale. When local engagement weakens, so does the sense of ownership and stewardship that communities feel toward their waterways and natural areas.

Financial transparency is another major concern. Municipalities want clear, accountable budgeting processes, and they worry that consolidation may obscure how levies are allocated or redistribute resources away from smaller watersheds. Many fear that efficiencies promised through “economies of scale” will not materialize, and that instead they could end up paying more for fewer localized services. The argument that “bigger saves money” is not supported by experiences in other sectors, where consolidation often increases overhead costs, administrative layers, and complexity while reducing accessibility and responsiveness.

Perhaps the deepest concern is that consolidation may shift decision-making toward top-down regional priorities, replacing long-standing local relationships, local branding, and locally relevant environmental initiatives with a centralized identity that feels disconnected from the community. Conservation authorities have spent decades building trust with residents, farmers, businesses, Indigenous communities, and municipalities. That trust is rooted in local presence, local identity, and local autonomy. Consolidation risks weakening these relationships by creating greater distance between decision-makers and the communities they serve.

All of this points toward a central truth that communities understand clearly:

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Local conservation authorities are effective precisely because they are local.

Individual watershed authorities offer intimate knowledge, agility, accountability, and direct relationships that cannot simply be scaled up or recreated regionally. Bigger systems often become more bureaucratic, less transparent, and more distant—while smaller, community-rooted authorities remain responsive, adaptive, and trusted.

Therefore, the argument is not simply about resisting change; it is about protecting what works. The existing framework composed of individual, place-based conservation authorities has proven effective for decades because it integrates scientific expertise with local wisdom, governance, and stewardship. Rather than consolidating, many communities argue for strengthening existing authorities, improving collaboration where beneficial, and investing in local capacity.

In watershed management, as in many community-centered services, bigger is rarely better if it comes at the cost of local identity, local expertise, and local voice. The goal should be to enhance coordination without erasing the deeply rooted, community-based strengths that define conservation authorities.

A stronger future for watershed protection means building on what already works, not replacing it with a larger, less personal system that risks losing the very qualities that made conservation authorities successful in the first place.