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November 29, 2013

Re: Conservation Ontario's Comments on "Strengthening Ontario's Trails Strategy" (EBR # 011-9565)

Dear Ms. Tinta,

Thank you for providing the opportunity to comment on the Discussion Paper "Strengthening Ontario's Trails Strategy" (EBR # 011-9565). Conservation Ontario (CO) represents Ontario's 36 Conservation Authorities (CAs) who own and maintain 2491 km of trails. As trail managers, Conservation Authorities understand the increasing public interest and need to access lands and trails for conservation, outdoor recreation, and education purposes. CO was engaged in the effort to develop the 2005 Ontario Trails Strategy (OTS) and I now represent CO on the Ontario Trails Coordinating Committee. CO remains supportive of the vision of "a world class system of diversified trails, planned and used in an environmentally responsible manner that enhances the health and prosperity of all Ontarians" and the goals and objectives of the 2005 OTS and CO is supportive of the Ministry of Tourism and Recreation's proposed improvements. A critical part of strengthening the OTS will be developing a plan for producing provincial policy guidance on key issues such as terms of liability, and standards of practice in trail management. The province is also encouraged to strengthen its lead role in supporting collaborative initiatives between trail management agencies and partners to ensure sustainability of Ontario's trails. The following comments are provided in response to questions in the discussion paper.

1. Currently the Strategy defines trails as: footpaths with natural surface; multi-use tracks with a manufactured surface; on-road bicycle routes; walkways, boardwalks, sidewalks; utility corridors or former rail lines; multi-use trails on Crown land with natural surfaces in natural areas; forestry and mining access roads that have been designated as a trail; or waterways or portage routes. Do we need to create a definition for the term "designated recreational trail"? If yes, what should that definition be?

Yes, it would be beneficial for the Trails Community and Land Managers to have a set definition for a designated recreation trail. The current list of trail examples in the OTS could be improved to be both more inclusive and more specific. The list in the Background section of the Canadian Trails Study (NTC,

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2010) is a valuable example to review. Without a full definition, the distinct planning and management requirements associated with sustainable trail development are not acknowledged.

Additionally, the definition should include designation of trails broadly in all examples to remove informal, undesignated trails and as such, address liability and safety issues. This designation should be done through proper signage, promotion, and ensuring design standards are met. One suggested definition is “a (designated) trail which offers opportunities for members of public to increase physical activity, improve health and wellness, and appreciate the natural and human history across local communities throughout Ontario”. Another definition to consider is the B.C Trails Strategy definition “a path or route (designated) solely or partly used for one or more recreation functions.”

2. Are the key challenges listed above still relevant today? Yes.

3. Of the key challenges listed, which ones need to be addressed first?

There are four key challenges that the discussion paper acknowledges that need to be addressed first:

- Support for trail planning, development and maintenance, (could include standardized provincial policies to address issues like multi-use conflicts, inconsistent level of service)
- Establishing new policies for former rail lines
- Financial stability for not-for-profit trail groups including tax incentives for trail operators, such as Conservation Land Tax Incentive program
- Liability – perceived and actual liability, and associated duty of care

4. What are possible solutions for ensuring the sustainability of Ontario’s trails?

There is a need for greater collaboration amongst trail organizations; including shared resources, innovative funding partnerships, collaborative planning exercises (municipal/regional Active Transportation Master Plans), and leadership at the provincial level. One way that provincial leadership could be useful is in developing a coordinated trails marketing strategy with provincial branding for Ontario’s trail network. However, financial assistance is needed for trail groups to maintain existing trails, and develop new trails and facilities, as part of this linked network. To assist trails groups in achieving financial sustainability, it is suggested that the province consider encouraging corporate/private financial support for trails through a sponsorship program that could be linked to the Ontario Trails Coordinating Committee.

Another area where provincial leadership is needed to ensure the sustainability of Ontario’s trails is developing trail planning, design, inspection and maintenance guidelines and standards that accurately reflect trail purposes, and that can be adopted at a local level (i.e. guidelines for enhancing deteriorating trails, strategies for managing unsanctioned use or conflicting uses). Improved or new provincial policies for trails should better define permitted trail uses on each type of trail and a requirement for signs to indicate this is needed. It is also suggested that the province consider working with industry to address unauthorized uses (i.e. ATV/e-bike manufacturers, geo-cache web operators).

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In addition, recommendations that speak to providing trail and greenspace access to, and within communities are needed in urban design guidelines, provincial policy statements, and/or other land use planning policy.

5. What other trail issues need to be addressed?

The document notes that some concerns have been expressed regarding the need to preserve cultural heritage resources when planning, developing and maintaining trails. It should be emphasized that natural heritage resources also need protection and consideration in trail planning and management.

Other issues that Conservation Authorities have encountered in operating trails that have not been addressed in this discussion paper include:

- Applying accessibility standards in rural and remote areas ;
- Development of a consistent provincial signage and trail classification system;
- Impacts of increasing trail use and changing demographics which puts increased pressure on existing trail networks and greenspaces;
- The increasing use of e-bikes / motorized mobility scooters (this should be addressed provincially, consideration is needed for appropriateness of use on various trail types)

6. What do you think of the proposals outlined above?

All of the proposals outlined in the discussion paper are very relevant and timely. The final revised strategy should make clear links between goals and concrete actions that will be required to implement the proposals. This should include identification of appropriate lead agencies for each action.

The proposal to provide for greater clarity in the Occupiers Liability Act to address trail operator and user concerns is particularly welcome. If the Act is amended to require compliance with industry standards it will be important to first define these standards for trail managers such as CAs.

7. What other legal and policy proposals should the Province consider?

See responses to questions 8 and 4.

8. What key areas need more research?

One key area that needs further research is determining how to effectively provide for passive and non passive trail use and avoid conflict. Many Conservation Authorities have developed large trail networks in their Conservation Areas. In some cases the trail systems for motorized and non-motorized use are separate entities but on occasion, they must share. It would be helpful to conduct some further study on how to create a truly multi-use trail that addresses the issues of safety and liability and to use this to develop provincial guidance. Research on the environmental impacts of trails and best management practices to avoid and mitigate these impacts would also be useful.

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Another area that could benefit from further research is the collection of data to support and highlight the benefits of strong trail infrastructure to the health of Ontarians and to Ontario's natural and economic environment. This could be used to produce further communications/marketing materials. Finally, the development of trail visitor monitoring programs could be used by trail management agencies to better meet user needs, to quantify the value of trails and support funding requests.

9. What can the Province and/or trail organizations do to:

a. promote trails more effectively;

Trails organizations and the province can partner with industry and the health sector. Trail organizations can work with municipal governments to promote local trails. The province could take a lead role in coordinating and promoting the efforts of trail organizations across Ontario and marketing local/regional and provincial trail networks.

b. increase trail tourism;

First we need to improve the existing trail product in Ontario, as described in comments above. Secondly, efforts can be made to market trail products through partnerships with local/regional tourism agencies, and trail-based tourism destinations (e.g. accommodations, restaurants, etc.) to develop package opportunities. A central online provincial portal should be available that includes guidebooks and information from a variety of local trail organizations (including CAs).

c. maximize the opportunities associated with water trails; and/or

Many CAs produce communications materials to highlight the natural heritage and cultural and historical value of local water trails. Other opportunities that could be considered at the provincial scale could include a festival that celebrates water trails in Ontario and associated marketing materials. Efforts to promote water trail opportunities could also be linked with Canada's National Rivers Day.

d. celebrate trails.

One way to celebrate trails would be to create an annual outdoor weekend trail symposium that is open to all. Demonstrations/exhibits and workshops at this event could increase trail tourism in certain areas and provide a chance for networking to develop funding partnerships. Another way to celebrate trails is to develop provincial promotional campaigns. For example, Conservation Ontario and Ontario's 36 Conservation Authorities just completed the first year of a campaign entitled "Healthy Hikes". This campaign included a challenge to spend time hiking in Ontario's Conservation Areas and track progress for a chance to win prizes. The program was done in cooperation with a variety of partner organizations with the goal of highlighting the role that the environment plays in human health.

10. What trail-related products and opportunities can we market?

Provincial promotional campaigns such as CO's Healthy Hikes program can be marketed as opportunities to increase trail use and highlight the relationship between trails and health. Conservation Area memberships can also be marketed for the same reason. Finally, connections between trails and agricultural communities and farm gate sales, wineries should be considered. This provides an opportunity to support the local food movement and invest in rural communities.

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11. What additional opportunities can the Province, trail organizations and/or interested stakeholder leverage to support trails?

A provincial organization such as the Ontario Trails Coordinating Committee or the Ontario Trails Council should be involved in creating a set of shared standards, policies and materials to create more consistency in trails management and minimizing liability in Ontario. This organization could also advise and work on a shared trails marketing strategy for Ontario.

As the discussion paper correctly highlights, the multi-ministry Ontario Great Lakes Strategy contains a variety of actions related to trails. The Province, trail organizations and/or interested stakeholders such as Conservation Authorities could consider how the trails systems that currently exist and the programs that use them can be used to help people re-connect and enjoy the Great Lakes. Investing in this type of initiative would allow the province to meet goals in both the trails strategy and the Great Lakes Strategy.

12. What lessons can be learned from other jurisdictions?

Other jurisdictions are working on creating a classification system with standards for trails; a similar approach may work in Ontario. One example to consider is Alberta's "Recreation Corridor and Trails Classification System". It is also our understanding that Parks Canada is working on assessing and setting standards for all of their trails. The goal is to promote each kind of trail as a different experience with standards for each type. Developing general standards across the province that will help define and identify trails can be part of creating promotional products like this.

Once again thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the discussion paper "Strengthening Ontario's Trails Strategy". As organizations involved in trail management, Conservation Authorities have observed a need for greater collaboration to ensure the sustainability of Ontario's trails. Accordingly, Conservation Ontario remains supportive of the vision, goals and objectives of the OTS and is supportive of the Ministry of Tourism and Recreation's proposed improvements. The comments in this letter draw on our collective experience to further strengthen the OTS. Should you have any questions about this letter, please contact Samantha Dupre Policy and Planning Officer (ext 228).

Sincerely,



Richard Wyma
Conservation Ontario's Ontario Trails Coordinating Committee Representative
General Manager/Secretary-Treasurer, Essex Region Conservation Authority

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