



Proposed Consolidation of Conservation Authorities

Overview for Municipalities

In 1946, the Ontario government passed the Conservation Authorities Act, which enabled municipalities to create watershed-based resource management agencies and assume responsibility for their governance and funding at the local level.

On November 6, 2025, the Province released Bill 68, “Plan to Protect Ontario Act.” Schedule 3 of this bill outlines changes to the Conservation Authorities Act including the establishment of a new agency, the Ontario Provincial Conservation Agency, to provide leadership, governance, and strategic direction to Conservation Authorities (CAs).

The Bill has now received royal assent with no opportunity for input or comment. Costs associated with the new agency can be billed or apportioned to municipalities.

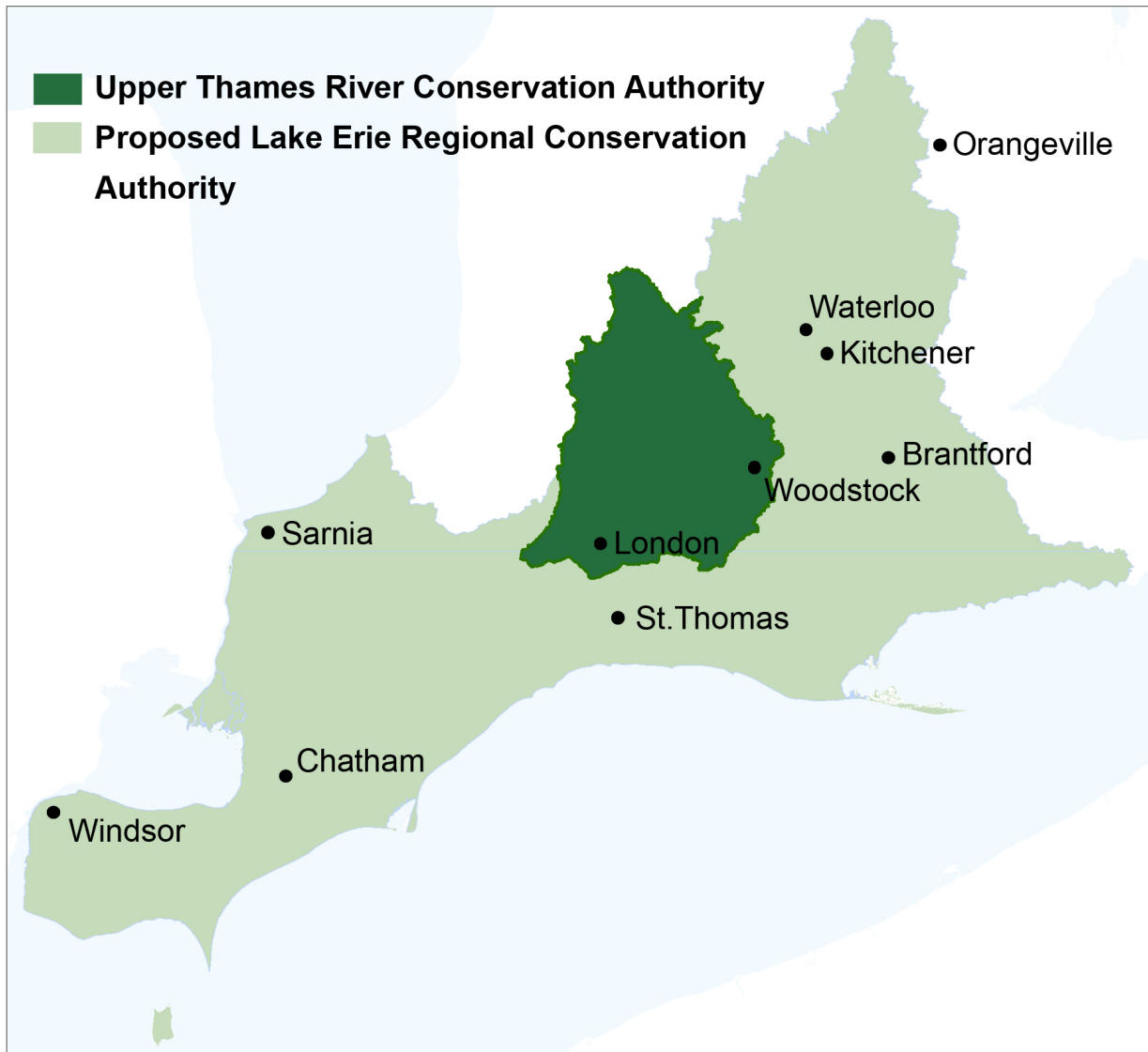
Conservation Authority Consolidation

On November 7, a consultation period was initiated for an Environmental Registry of Ontario (ERO) posting that recommends consolidating the 36 existing CAs into seven regional CAs.

The Upper Thames River Conservation Authority (UTRCA) would become part of the proposed Lake Erie Regional Conservation Authority. The new regional conservation authority would amalgamate eight existing conservation authorities:

- Catfish Creek,
- Essex Region,
- Grand River,
- Kettle Creek,
- Long Point Region
- Lower Thames Valley,
- St. Clair Region,
- Upper Thames River.

The proposed Lake Erie Regional Conservation Authority would include 81 municipalities. The eight individual Boards of Directors of the existing conservation authorities, made up of local municipal representatives, would be replaced by a new, yet to be determined, municipal governance structure.



Your Voice Matters

The UTRCA Board of Directors strongly encourages our member municipalities to carefully evaluate the Province's proposal. This proposal has serious, long-lasting implications for local watershed management.

ERO #025-1257 is open for public comment until December 22, 2025.

Submit your comments at ero.ontario.ca/notice/025-1257

Considerations for Municipalities

Erosion of Local Governance

The UTRCA was created in 1947 as a partnership between member municipalities to use local knowledge and expertise to make decisions regarding the management of the watershed’s natural resources. The Authority is directed by a Board of 15 municipally elected (or appointed) officials representing the 17 watershed municipalities. These 15 members determine the programs and services the Conservation Authority provides to watershed communities.

Under the new proposal, 81 member municipalities will vie for a voice and representation on a single regional conservation authority board. This shift will significantly weaken local ties and community-level representation. Municipalities will lose the opportunity to voice the concerns of their constituents and have meaningful influence in decision-making.

Any new governance model should reflect the significant financial contributions municipalities make to CA budgets and ensure all municipalities retain an appropriate and equitable say.

Economic Impacts

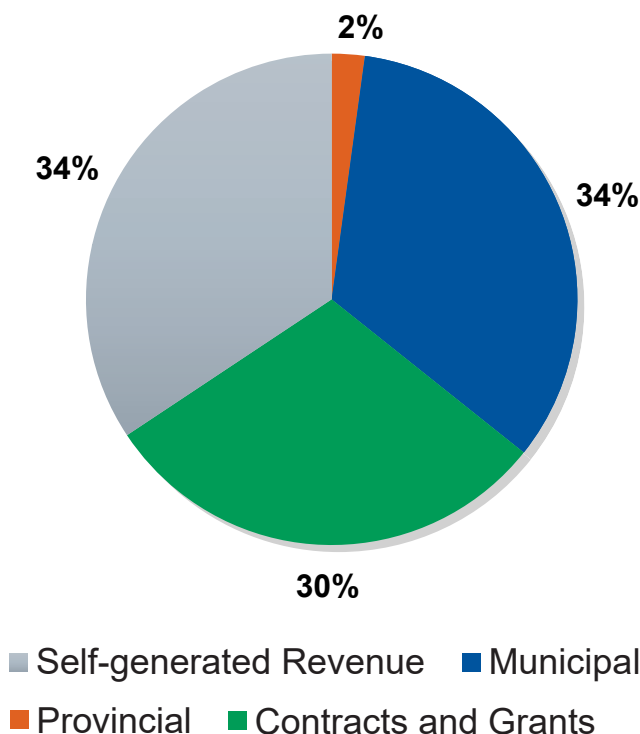
Provincial contributions represent just 2% of UTRCA’s operating budget, while member municipalities contribute 34% through levies and cost-sharing agreements, and 34% of revenue is self-generated through user fees and donations. The remaining 30% is obtained through applications to foundations and other levels of government to leverage the municipal contributions and provide more robust programs to watershed residents.

Municipalities will continue to pay the lion’s share of the costs, even as the new legislation and proposed regional CA model diminishes their ability to exercise meaningful oversight and maintain control over local watershed management decisions.

Service Levels

Service levels vary across Conservation Authorities because each CA’s programs and services—developed under the oversight of its local Board of Directors—are tailored to the unique needs of their communities, local watershed conditions, municipal priorities and budgets, and community input.

Creating uniform service levels across a regional structure means some areas may see



improvements, while others may experience a reduction in the services they currently receive. It may also result in important, locally valued programs and services being lost, as support is redirected elsewhere. How will the program costs be equitably distributed over the broader regional CA? Will levies paid by Upper Thames River watershed municipalities be distributed outside of the watershed?

Assets

A thorough financial and legal due diligence process is necessary to assess existing liabilities, assets, and any restrictions on current funding or land transfers. Under the proposed model, all assets and reserves will be transferred to the regional CA, significantly reducing the ability of local municipalities to influence decisions about lands and resources in their own communities.

For example, the UTRCA owns and/or manages more than 5,790 ha (14,300 ac) of land within the Upper Thames River watershed, spread across some 40 properties. Many of these properties were entrusted to the UTRCA for long-term protection, stewardship, and the public good, with the expectation that such lands would be cared for by locally governed conservation authorities.

“Local” Matters

Consolidating and potentially centralizing administration could reduce responsiveness, delay decisions, and weaken the local expertise and community connections that are fundamental to effective watershed management. Conservation Authorities were built on strong local relationships and face-to-face communication. “Boots on the ground” are essential for effective monitoring, stewardship, enforcement, and community engagement.

Municipal planners, developers, and watershed landowners rely on UTRCA staff for timely review of planning and regulation matters. UTRCA consistently processes permits within or exceeding provincial timelines. Moving to a regionalized model risks new bottlenecks, slowing approvals and reducing timely support for local planning and development.

Key Messages

We support efforts to enhance expertise, capacity, and program delivery across Ontario. However, we urge the Province to work collaboratively with municipalities and local Conservation Authorities to identify the most cost-effective level of strategic consolidation—one that advances both provincial and local objectives without diminishing local input and control:

- The size and scope of the Lake Erie Region CA is too large. A more measured approach would deliver on the provincial goals without all the negative consequences of the current proposal,
- A comprehensive cost-benefit analysis that provides evidence that consolidations of this size would reduce costs and provide better service the risks outweigh any perceived benefits is required.
- There are opportunities for shared services or consolidation at a smaller scale than what the Province has proposed,
- Governance models must continue to support local decision-making through municipal representation that balances rural and urban priorities and interests, while taking this opportunity to add Indigenous perspectives,
- Local offices and existing staffing levels must remain to preserve local expertise, relationships, and responsiveness,
- Standardization throughout the region can be achieved within the current Conservation Authority structure with updated technical guidance, policy approaches, and modernization tools.

Questions?

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