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Dear Editor:

“A Solution for the Trent-Severn Waterway”

Over the past three weeks, several people have written to the County Voice to express their opinions about the Trent-Severn Waterway and the TSW Panel’s report “It’s All About the Water” (dated March 2008). To say that this exchange has been stimulating and interesting would be more than just an understatement.

It was heartening to see that the writers were in agreement on many issues; but unfortunately, what was lacking was agreement on a strategy for the establishment of an Independent Water Management Agency (IWMA) – even though all felt that this was a key component.

To explain the importance of the IWMA, I’d like to begin by quoting from the TSW Panel Report – ‘There is not great confidence in the performance of governments with respect to management of the waterway system. Dozens of different government agencies – federal, provincial, municipal and First Nations – exercise some form of jurisdiction over the waterway management with resulting duplication, overlap and gaps in accountability. These agencies appear not to communicate with each other and generally don’t provide effective mechanisms that permit the public to speak with them.’

In other words, management of the TSW system (i.e. the canal, the canal lakes, the reservoir lakes and the enclosing watershed as one entity) is dysfunctional.

These jurisdictional issues are not new and efforts have been made to address them since 1938. I’m at a loss to understand why, after 81 years, the problem still persists.

Fortunately, a solution is at hand. The TSW Panel advocated the ‘establishment and appropriate funding of an independent water management agency, to assume responsibility for managing water storage, flows, allocation and use in the TSW system.

In his letter, Barry Devolin stated, “I have always recognized that the most significant recommendation in the panel’s report has been the establishment of an IWMA and frankly, I was waiting for the report myself to see if the government would proceed with that.”

It is therefore perplexing that instead of embracing that recommendation, thereby showing his commitment to improvements in the TSW watershed, Mr. Devolin now proposes that there be a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), between the federal and provincial governments. Mr. Hunt says that he agrees with that approach.

On the surface, this may sound fine. But, it falls short of establishing an IWMA and therefore will probably resolve nothing. To be blunt, the MOU may be politically correct, but strategically, it is more than likely a waste of time. Why? Because a similar effort in the early 1970’s produced a similar agreement, only to see it abandoned after less than a year.

In order to appreciate why it is a fruitless endeavour, one must understand the driving force within the civil service – namely power. Generally speaking, managers (primarily in the civil service, but also in many large organizations) are driven by the desire for power and will strive not just to maintain power but to gain more of it. Fulfilling a mandate (i.e. providing a service) is frequently secondary; unless of course, that mandate can be used as a means of gaining more power.

To be fair, this is not a hard and fast rule and there are exceptions. But having worked in government for more than 10 years, I have seen too many examples of managers cleverly pursuing this quest for power.

In light of this, it is quite easy to see why managers in the federal and provincial governments are unwilling to give up their control of certain parts of the TSW system. To do so would be to relinquish power.

This is exactly why an MOU is doomed to failure and why an IWMA is so important. Instead of the current dysfunctional model, the IWMA alone should be responsible for managing water storage, flows, allocation and use in the entire TSW system. This would improve the overall management of the TSW system and should also improve the quality of its waters.

As an independent body, the IWMA would not be swayed by changes within departments or even changes of government. It would reach above the silos of power (i.e. bureaucratic departments) and look far into the future, instead of only reaching out as far as the next election. It would consider the TSW system as an entity, not as a series of channels, a collection of dams, a cluster of ‘reservoir’ and ‘flow through’ lakes, a handful of hydro power plants, or a group of municipalities with water and sewage concerns. It would fairly consider the needs of all TSW system stakeholders (businessmen, cottagers, boaters, farmers, etc.). It would establish goals and objectives that everyone dealing with the entire watershed would use as guidance

in their policies and procedures. As you can see, it is clearly the most important recommendation in the TSW Panel Report.

There is still an opportunity to salvage this key component. The terms of reference for the MOU can be altered so that the two levels of government will take the necessary steps to establish the framework and composition of an IWMA. In laymen's terms, this means that the MOU would focus on the creation of a committee that would look at the best way of establishing an IWMA. This committee would not become the IWMA, but rather consider alternatives and advocate the best means of creating the IWMA.

Considering the number of government organizations involved with the TSW system, this is not a trivial task and it would take a reasonable amount of time (not less than 6 month or more than two years). But at least it would be a big step in the right direction.

It will be interesting to see whether we can hope for this significant step, or do we merely throw the TSW Panel Report on the heap of unfulfilled political promises and abandoned dreams.

The Harper government is spending millions of our taxpayer's dollars trying to convince Canadians that is it a caring and competent government. This unsatisfactory response to the TSW Panel Report shows the exact opposite.

I urge everyone who is concerned about the TSW system to read the Panel's excellent report. It is still available at <http://www.tswpanel.ca/english/report.asp>.

Dennis Choptiany  
Koshlong Lake

*(NOTE – Although I am a director of the Koshlong Lake Association, I am writing this letter as a concerned individual.)*