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Water Management Advisory Council Appointed for Trent-Severn Waterway
by Liz Danielsen

As part of their official action plan for the future of the Trent-Severn Waterway announced early last fall, the federal government has announced the creation of a new Trent-Severn Water Management Advisory Council. Along with representatives from a number of government based organizations and a soon to be confirmed First Nations representative from within the watershed, the eight member Advisory Council includes two representatives from Haliburton County; Keith Hodgson and Chris Riddle.

Chris Riddle is a local cottager and an active executive member of the Kennisis Lake Cottage Owners Association. He Co-chairs the Coalition for Equitable Water Flow and took an active role during the panel discussions that led up to the establishment of a report on the future of the Trent-Severn Waterway and the government's official response to that report.

Keith Hodgson is a Haliburton logger and long time naturalist and outdoorsman who has been instrumental over the years in establishing the Haliburton Highlands Outdoors Association. He is the son of the late Glen Hodgson, area MPP during the 1960's and 70's and is a devoted hunter, fisherman and environmentalist.

Speaking about the panel members, Minister Jim Prentice said "It is a pleasure to welcome these dedicated individuals representing a range of organizations with an interest in water management to participate in developing a shared vision for a balanced approach to water management."

The Water Management Advisory Council will provide expert and stakeholder advice to Parks Canada on how to better carry out its responsibilities for water management through the Trent and Severn River watersheds. Riddle and Hodgson will be called upon to review water management policies, provide advice on issues and help to develop a shared vision for a balanced approach in managing the two watersheds. According to Minister Prentice, over the next two years the council is expected to contribute to a more transparent decision-making process regarding water allocation decisions.

Haliburton Kawartha Lakes Brock MP Barry Devolin said, "The creation of the Water Management Advisory Council serves as another tangible expression of the government's action plan for the Trent-Severn Waterway." Devolin extended his appreciation to all of the members of the Council for contributing their time and perspectives as volunteers in what he considers to be very important work.

Hodgson, who has considerable experience with lake trout fisheries on the reservoir lakes, suggested that the government had sought him out to provide an angler/hunter perspective. He said that the Council appeared to be a very dynamic group that would offer broad representation.

Hodgson said that during their session a consulting contract worth $600,000 had been awarded to AECOM Canada Ltd. to do a needs study for the TSW. "Basically they will look at necessary improvements for the entire system; the effectiveness of the locks, water flow and bottlenecks that create flooding. Theirs will be a much more technical perspective than work done in the past; it will be more to do with the motor of the system and making it work more efficiently from one end to the other."

Hodgson says he hopes to raise awareness about the importance of fisheries in the reservoir lakes and how they are affected by high and low water levels. "I don't think that a lot of cottagers in the area fully understand exactly where the water goes. From time to time people buy cottages without realizing that their entire bay could be empty in the fall. They need some water all the time and education about that is a good start for everyone."

Referring to his involvement in the fish hatchery since 1992, Hodgson said that he hoped his input would enhance education on the effects of dramatic reductions in water levels, what the results are on the fisheries and how important that will be for the area.

He has some ideas on education that are being well received by other members to establish a best practice code for reservoir lakes and shoreline protection. He also said that if anyone had a genuine concern that hadn't been heard during the public debates he would take it forward to the committee. "I will always have time to pass on people's concerns.

Hodgson said that while the Board might be a bit limited given their strictly advisory role, there was a lot of knowledge in the members, and while he felt he was the low man on the totem pole he would be able to help given his intimate knowledge of the county from one end to the other. He said, "It's not easy to make the system work, but they have clear goals and objectives now, the first of which is safety, then the environment and finally the operation of the canal."

"Their whole system is crumbling and it needs a lot of infrastructure replacement. They've been successful with some repairs but they are way behind in maintaining safe structures. The federal government has a real hard garden to hoe to make everything safe. They've done a lot of work, but haven't made enough gains."

Hodgson also spoke about the challenges of dealing with vastly differing objectives, the permitting system along the length of the system and how that affects the annual use of water. He said, "There are 2400 permits to take water along the length of the Trent and the Ministry of Environment looks at them on an individual basis rather than from an overall perspective. Collectively there is a huge impact and all that needs to be reviewed. At the other end of the spectrum are the impacts of spring runoff. You can only put so much water through the system without creating flooding. " Hodgson voiced concern about the availability of funding to conduct much needed reviews.

According to Hodgson, even though TSW engineers have to make quick decisions that can have considerable impact, they are doing an excellent job. "They don't have the money to educate or speak with all of the lake associations, but if people understood the system better they might accept a moderate drop in their lake."

Hodgson touched on the panel's recommendation for an independent water management agency rather than the system being operated by Parks Canada. He said, "The TSW has some very knowledgeable engineers working on the system and I don't know if a board could run the system. It would be like having a team of people trying to drive a car when you have Jacques Villeneuve at the wheel."

"It's a matter of public relations and alternatives, being able to mitigate water coming out of the reservoir lakes, seeing how detrimental dramatic reductions can be to the fisheries and the environment and ensuring that shorelines and docks aren't damaged. The actual operation of the canal should be done by those who have operated it daily and have staved off emergencies. A management board could complicate things too much."

Chris Riddle attributed his appointment to the Council to his experience and liaison as a leading member of the Coalition for Equitable Water Flow with the TSW, but said that having someone else join him in representing the reservoir lake region with a broad knowledge of the area was very helpful.

According to Riddle the Council met informally about a month ago to allow introductions and to get an initial handle on the process. The first formal meeting took place last Tuesday and took the form of an in depth briefing to bring individual members up to speed on what TSW does and how broad their mandate is and to consider the complexities of handling water management.

"The Council's mandate will be limited to the water management program. Meanwhile, Parks Canada will be talking to others about issues like tourism and heritage."

Riddle said it was too early to know exactly how the Council's role would unfold particularly as the current TSW Superintendent Peter Frood will be retiring later this month. In addition, there is an interim chair as the person initially identified as the chair has decided he could not continue.

"The real meat of what the Council will do won't start until the next meeting and there is a bit of uncertainty in terms of direction with no real chair to take control and communicate to the Council, Parks Canada and the public."

Riddle agreed with Hodgson that there were a lot of positives when looking at a group with such an excellent range of expertise, knowledge and diversity of experience and interest. "It is my hope that if we use that knowledge to develop a consensus and some robust advice, Parks Canada will accept it and take appropriate action."

Riddle admitted it would take some time for the group to get to the point of making recommendations, but building on the work of the panel, the panel report and all of the background reports would all be excellent fodder for the Council.

"The key thing for the Council is to identify their priority areas and I think that will happen in short order."

"Two other parallel things are happening that will have a significant influence on what the Council will do. First Parks Canada has started a review of their water management model." He referred to the consultant engaged to submit a report in the coming year from a technical perspective on the model TSW is using now. "The council will be meeting and interacting with them and it will be very interested to see what they come up with.

The second thing is the federal government's plan to develop a memorandum of understanding with the province. There have been indications that the province is taking its time because the MOU will cover a number of different issues with different ministries."

Riddle said that at this point he was only reading between the lines when it came to the intricacies of establishing the MOU, but confirmed that there would be no political representation or involvement in the activities of the Advisory Council.

As an aside, Riddle said he was very pleased to see Haliburton County include a clear and significant focus on shoreline vegetation and protection and tree cutting in their Official Plan as the first line of defence to protect the quality of water and the cascading affect those changes had in seeing similar changes being made at the municipal level.

He spoke of his experience in working on the development of the Kennisis Lake Plan. "I realized that most people want to do the right thing but they sometimes don't know exactly what that is. Two thirds of our recommendations were soft, related to stewardship, education, communications and group volunteer action. If there is momentum it will be toward things that would mean less regulatory action. No one wants rules for a recreational property area and we're trying to escape from that. It's more a matter of sharing and education.

It's not so much the product but the process and lake planning says that in spades."

Riddle voiced some frustration with the fact that, during discussions about the canal, the reservoir lakes are often an afterthought. "It is easy to forget where the water comes from and the impact on people from the reservoir lakes region, so having a couple of people from Haliburton is great. We can help to educate our own people and the TSW as well." ■