

Conservation Authority backs karst expansion bid

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by Richard Leitner, Hamilton
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The Hamilton Conservation Authority is welcoming calls to expand the protection area by Stoney Creek's Eramosa Karst park.

Citing "new information" from three key experts, directors voted last week to offer to assume ownership of 80 hectares of provincially owned land to the east of the park.

Authority chair Chris Firth-Eagland said he's hopeful Premier Dalton McGuinty will be receptive to the expansion given that it has the support of all three authors of a 2003 report that convinced his government to donate the existing 73-hectare park to the authority last fall.

Karst experts Marcus Buck, Stephen Worthington and Derek Ford have all now written letters expressing concern that plans for housing on adjacent land will alter water flows and erosion patterns in the karst, a rare formation of caves, sink holes, dry valleys and sinking streams created by dissolving limestone.

"When I think that there's only three (karsts) in the province and it's the only one protected, we're obligated to take a close look at the implications of the documents from these experts," Mr. Firth-Eagland said.

"It's our first and foremost mandate, the preservation of significant environmental and ecological features. And we're remiss that we didn't have this information before, but now that's out there, it's leading to a lot of agencies and people having a new look at the property."

The authority's support for the park's expansion comes on the heels of a similar call from Hamilton councillors.

The 80 hectares to the east of the karst -- located located east of Mount Albion Road between Rymal and Highland roads -- are presently undergoing studies to make way for an estimated 800 homes.

All three experts have expressed concern about the impacts of housing and a collector road that will cut through the property.

In his Sept. 6 letter, Dr. Ford calls the karst "one of the gems of the Escarpment" that will serve as an educational site for students in middle school through university.

"I have seen too many karst drainage basins elsewhere that are terribly degraded by urbanization and where restitution will be physically impossible or, at the least, prohibitively expensive," he states.

"The Eramosa Feeder Area is quite small in extent. I urge that it be fully protected."

Stoney Creek Councillor Brad Clark, who is also a conservation authority director, said he's "cautiously optimistic" Mr. McGuinty will heed the expert advice.

A fourth karst scientist, Daryl Cowell, who served as a city expert witness during hearings on the expansion of the area's urban boundary, also last week offered his support for the bigger protection area.

"These are world-renowned karst experts that are called all over the globe for their expertise and they stepped forward, each one individually but concurring with each other that this particular property needs preservation," Mr. Clark said.

"I can only tell you what the residents are asking me: how could the premier of the province of Ontario do all this work to protect the original karst and now proceed to develop the land that he actually owns, the province owns, when he's being told it will damage the land that he originally protected?"

Bill Moore, a spokesperson for Ontario Realty Corp., which manages the land for the province, said his agency continues to survey the site's archaeological and hydrogeological features.

"We're generally looking at everything that's on the site and trying to make an informed decision from that," he said.