

Environmental commissioner Miller encourages King to get engaged

By Mark Pavilons

Despite



ur green goals, Ontario is still waging an uphill battle to combat climate change.

In the face of a warning from Ontario's environmental commissioner, there is hope and optimism, which rest in the hands of the public and municipalities.

Gord Miller, Ontario's environmental commissioner, visited Nobleton Library last week, letting residents know about his role, the state of our environment, and the power that taxpayers have within their grasp.

Miller, who's in his third term as commissioner, pointed out Ontario is unique in the world regarding its environmental policies and watchdogs. Our Environmental Bill of Rights is unique to our province and this legislation enshrines many rights. One of the more important ones is the right to ask for a review of any provincial policy or legislation. All it takes is two citizens to file a request and Miller's office forwards it to the appropriate ministry, which must respond.

He added there are also provisions regarding the right to sue, if harm to a public resource can be proven. The bill also has strong whistle-blower protection.

“Citizens have power and pressure works,” he said. Requests from the public give him great moral authority to proceed with inquiries.

Oak Ridges-Markham MPP Helena Jaczek concurred, noting the key to getting attention at Queen's Park is repetition. She said constructive submissions from a number of residents does make a difference. The government's focus on the environment means Jaczek wants to hear from constituents on moving forward.

Miller's office reviews environmentally significant regulations and legislations, and he pens several annual reports presented to the legislature.

While he can be the government's best friend, he admitted he's “ruthless” as a critic.

He even picks out subtleties in revamped legislation. He pointed to recent changes in regulations government livestock compensation “animals killed by predators. The list includes some odd creatures, some of which are not even native to southern Ontario.

From land use planning and green energy to protecting wildlife, Miller's office handles it all. He offered a list of marine animals native to Ontario that most residents, and some ministry staffers, aren't even aware of. Ontario is home to polar bears, orcas, seals, walruses and belugas.

But Miller is patient and he “plays a long game.”

Of particular importance to King, and southern Ontario, is the scheduled 2015 review of major pieces of environmental policy ? the Niagara Escarpment Plan, Oak Ridges Moraine Plan and Greenbelt plan.

The ORM plan is a good one and serves as a successful model, he said. The problem moving forward is to protect the integrity of each plan in the whole and recognize the unique Moraine policies.

Special interest groups and municipalities should begin a review of these policies now, in preparation for 2015 by gathering data and lobbying the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, which is not known for being particularly progressive.

Residents and municipalities can motivate the ministry into action. But they need a push.

Public consultation events are planned for the review and Miller urged everyone to "take advantage of it."

Miller said the province is in a "huge state of flux" and he's often frustrated by policy statements that conflict with scientific evidence. The recent announcement about resurrecting the Pickering airport is a case in point.

More emphasis is needed on conservation.

That point was brought home in Miller's 2013 annual report, "Failing our Future."

The government's long-term energy policy could wipe out some of the gains that have been made in reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

In its 2007 Climate Change Action Plan, the Ontario government established three targets for the reduction of greenhouse gases:

"6% below 1990 levels by 2014 (to approximately 166 megatonnes or Mt).

"15% below 1990 levels by 2020 (to approximately 150 Mt).

"80% below 1990 levels by 2050 (to approximately 35 Mt).

"The government is on track to meet 91% of its 2014 target, but I am worried about what comes after 2014," said Miller.

Failing our Future highlights that the Ontario government will only achieve 60% of the reductions necessary to meet its 2020 target for reducing GHG emissions.

"One of the reasons for this shortfall is the increased reliance on natural gas to generate electricity," he added.

According to the Ontario Power Authority (OPA), natural gas is expected to play an important role in meeting electricity demand in the future, especially when nuclear plants are refurbished in and around 2020/2021.

"This increased use of natural gas could lead to a rise in GHG emissions of between 4 and 16 Mt, depending on factors such as the existing generation capacity and weather," says Miller.

"I think the government should use the recently announced review of its Long-Term Energy Plan to make sure its energy planning is co-ordinated with the GHG reduction targets that are contained in its Climate Change Action Plan."

Miller also said the alternative energy groups need to be more proactive and vocal in their support for green energy in the form of solar and wind. One of the arguments against wind turbines is their damage to birds, yet his investigation revealed that a single turbine is responsible for 2.5 bird deaths a year, a tiny amount compared to those lost to buildings and hydro lines.

Heading forward, Miller said our best arsenal consists of program evaluation methods and tools. For every government program there should be a way to evaluate, monitor and analyze the efficiency. There's no shame in failure, but we need to know how programs are working.

Regarding the controversial peaker plant in King, Jaczek said it is operating at between 2% and 5% per month so far in 2013.

Miller said the problem with peaker plants is companies are being paid for 100% of the time they are in operation, and not just when they're producing energy. Taxpayers are on the hook for these inefficiencies.

Miller also criticized civil service cuts in vital areas such as the Ministry of Natural Resources. The public has to decide on its priorities and tell the province these impacts hurt.

The key to progress is to be involved.

"Stay engaged," Miller stressed.