

Commissioner says Ontario is failing in fight against climate change

By Mark Pavilons

We're losing the battle against protecting our planet, and we're partially to blame.

Ontario's Environmental Commissioner Gord Miller said we need to get back in the game on climate change.

‘The latest scientific evidence shows that the pace of climate change is accelerating,’ Miller said. ‘Extreme weather events have increased dramatically around the world. Here in Ontario though, the provincial government hasn't even delivered on commitments it made seven years ago.’

Miller last week released ‘Looking for Leadership, The Costs of Climate Inaction,’ his 2014 report on the government's progress in reducing greenhouse gases (GHG), and meeting the reduction targets contained in its Climate Change Action Plan.

The report shows that the government will likely meet its 2014 target (a 6% reduction in emissions below 1990 levels) largely because of the shutdown of the province's coal plants.

‘But it's not going to meet its 2020 target because it has taken very little additional action to implement the Climate Change Action Plan it released seven years ago.’

He points out that transportation, mainly cars and trucks, is the biggest source of GHG emissions in the province.

‘The 2007 Action Plan said the government would reduce transportation emissions by 19 megatonnes (Mt) by 2020. That goal, unfortunately, has now been cut by almost 80%. I have been given no reason why, and no explanation about what the Ontario government plans to do instead.’

Miller said the province has lost the leadership position it once had. ‘British Columbia has brought in a carbon tax; Quebec has implemented a cap-and-trade system for carbon credits. Meanwhile, Ontario appears to have lost the ambition it once had and won't even look at directives to ensure more compact urban development or a serious commitment to using electricity for transportation.’ The commissioner stressed society has to end its reliance on carbon-based fuels, especially for transportation.

‘We need to limit the increase in global temperatures to 2 degrees Celsius. But that can only be done if we leave two-thirds of the existing oil and natural gas reserves in the ground. People need to understand that brutal fact.’

You can download the full report at www.eco.on.ca.

King Councillor Debbie Schaefer said reading the report is very ‘sobering.’

She observed that Ontario was once so courageous and innovative. Since 1990 GHG emissions from our electricity grid have gone down 43%; industry's emissions have dropped 21%. Conversely, transportation has gone up 24% and it is now the largest source of GHG (34% in 2012) with all trends showing an increase.

‘How is it that we went through a provincial election and this was not one of the big issues debated with substance? There was not even a whisper on the topic of the 3rd source of emissions, namely buildings.’

Regarding local impacts, Schaefer said she wants to know the status of the flood plain mapping in our watersheds.

‘Given that we have numerous water courses traversing King and that we are in Lake Simcoe's watershed that mapping is very important. The more extreme weather events represent new vulnerabilities in terms of safety of life and property.’

Schaefer also noted that inadequate public transit is a critical issue.

‘We need to see Bus Route 61 (goes through our villages to meet the morning and afternoon GO trains) grow as the Province delivers on its commitment to increase GO train service. And in fact, as there is GO bus service throughout the day (stops at Hwy 9/400 and goes to Yorkdale), there should be local buses all day! It is frustrating to see new subdivisions being built on the assumption that there is virtually no public transit as 3-car garages and more are now the standard.

‘A modest balance would be insisting that all new residential construction feature larger diameter conduits and adequate capacity in the electrical panel so that when the homeowner does decide to purchase an electrical vehicle they can easily install repaired recharging infrastructure.

‘Our new residential subdivisions are being built with more energy efficient features. Unfortunately as Mr. Miller reviews, the building code amendments do not come into full force until 2017. Efforts by our Sustainability Committee and the Township staff to encourage builders to go beyond current legal requirements needs to continue.’

Schaefer said King needs to include funding and resources in its next budget to start implementation of their energy conservation and management plan for our more than 20 buildings and facilities. The current consumption of energy and a plan for conservation was presented to council in May _?‘now we have to start implementing it.’

For King's 2015 budget, Schaefer said she will once again ask for funds and resources to pilot a program to offer incentives to property owners to retrofit current structures to achieve a higher level of energy efficiency.

In 2012 Ministry of Municipal Affairs & Housing approved a regulatory change to explicitly allow municipalities to use local improvement charges (LICs) to finance energy efficiency improvements on private property. Essentially, a LIC is a loan made by a municipality to a building owner (home or commercial) that is recovered through the property tax system. Attaching the lien to the building as opposed to the property owner means that realizing payout of the investment does not require the property owner to stay there until it has been paid off. Another possible attraction is that municipality may be able to offer financing through the LIC at a lower interest as the municipality is protected from default on the loan.

The Concerned Citizens of King Township (CCKT), who hosted Miller at a local environmental forum in April, share his concerns. "Our ability to minimize our production of carbon pollution is a challenge we must face. We need to leave two-thirds of existing oil and natural gas reserves in the ground if we are to avoid significant levels of average global temperature increases in the decades to come," according to CCKT chair Greg Locke.

Locke said two areas that King needs to heed include furthering our efforts to reduce our reliance on petroleum-fueled cars, and compacting our urban development.

"It's important to take stock of what King has already done to show leadership in environmental stewardship.

"We have an Integrated Community Sustainability Plan (ICSP) that is an excellent framework with which to plan and invest in infrastructure. We can use it as a guiding reference point to minimize the effects of climate change, including the drastic increase in projected extreme weather events, particularly heavy rains and flooding. We can also use it to plan our communities."

Locke observed that to some extent we are embracing the intensification directives of Places to Grow. CCKT supports intensification within our defined village boundaries, where we have the infrastructure to support it.

"It makes no sense to be expanding employment areas with new and costly infrastructure where we can put it where he have it, already. Hence, the Region and the Township should have a serious look again at its publicly stated desire to open up 400-highway corridors to industrial and commercial development."

King is currently undertaking its Transportation Master Plan exercise and Locke observed this is an excellent time for staff and consultants to build in means by which we can significantly reduce our dependence on carbon-fuels cars.

"We need to design our communities so they're complete as well as compact. We shouldn't be jumping in the car to buy milk at the corner store (and many of us do, let's face it) and we need to locate employment closer to residential areas to reduce our culture of commuting."

The official plan review is also a time to include measures to force new development and infill to conform to higher standards, he said.

The GTA West Corridor consultation and planning exercise currently underway by the Province is of concern to CCKT for several reasons.

This is a plan if fulfilled, will see another 400-highway connecting Vaughan in the east to Burlington in the west.

"We're greatly concerned that this 'corridor' only speaks to extending the traditional highway system, with no consideration to alternated transportation technologies, including electrified trains, bike lanes, and the like. If this new corridor is built to accommodate only car and truck traffic, the ripple effects for King will be significant."

Public transportation, Locke observed, is critical to mitigating our growth in carbon emissions.

"In King, the only village that can support growth based on transit capacity is King City and it is built on the headwaters of the Humber, with significant environmental constraints. Transportation efficiencies will continue to be a challenge for rural municipalities like King."

We need to move toward more compact urban designs, at least in the cores of our villages. The Tomlinson Gardens (Nobleton Auto Wrecking site) residential application is an opportunity to showcase this, where we have a large intensification opportunity on a large piece of brownfield current being remediated.

Conservation Authorities are encouraged by Miller's report, particularly the call for additional investment in conservation authority flood programs in order to address the growing threat from extreme weather.

The report points out that not taking action today to manage the flooding impacts from extreme weather will be even more expensive in the future.

"We're very pleased that the commissioner draws attention to areas within Conservation Authority flood management programs that need to be immediately addressed in order to continue to protect people and property," said Kim Gavine, general manager of

Conservation Ontario, the association that represents Ontario's 36 conservation authorities.

Conservation authority programs help the Province meet its climate change adaptation objectives, specifically in areas such as flood management, stormwater runoff and water quality improvement. However, conservation authority flood management programs require significant attention in order to continue to be effective against more frequent and greater flood events.

?As the Commissioner points out in this report, outdated floodplain mapping, aging infrastructure, and stressed operations hinder the conservation authorities' ability to continue to protect people and property from the impacts of extreme weather.?