

## **Staff Report – September 18, 2025**

**TO: Chair and Members of Ganaraska Region Conservation Authority**

**RE: Cobourg Conservation Area Agreement**

### **Background:**

The Ganaraska Region Conservation Authority (GRCA) has had a signed agreement with the Town of Cobourg since May 29, 1990. Under this agreement, the Town is granted use of the Cobourg Conservation Area for park, recreational, and related purposes in exchange for ongoing maintenance of the lands. This arrangement has functioned successfully for many years.

### **Current Situation:**

The Town of Cobourg recently introduced a stormwater management charge applied to landowners within the Town. Exemptions were granted for school boards and Town-owned lands. In January 2024, GRCA formally requested an exemption from these charges. Town staff undertook a review of the request.

On December 18, 2024, Council passed By-law Number 065-2024. At that meeting, Councillors Mutton and Barber moved to exempt the GRCA-owned Cobourg Conservation Area from stormwater fees; however, the motion was defeated.

The Cobourg Conservation Area, located at 700 William Street, contains significant natural hazard features, including floodplain and erosion hazards. These lands serve as natural habitat, support biodiversity, and provide residents with passive recreational opportunities and nature-based experiences. The site is free of permanent impermeable structures, except for a small cairn (approximately 4' x 4') commemorating the official opening of the Cobourg Conservation Area by Queen Elizabeth II. There is also a hard surfaced trail, which was requested by the Town of Cobourg in 2002, leading from Elgin Street to the pedestrian bridge which was not constructed by the GRCA.

### **Concerns:**

Applying stormwater management charges to conservation lands sets a troubling precedent for Ontario. If other partner municipalities follow Cobourg's example, GRCA could face over \$1.8 million in annual costs based on Cobourg's original 2023 rate of \$402.10 per hectare. This would represent roughly 50% of the 2025 Preliminary GRCA budget.

While Cobourg has since reduced the rate (\$171.75 in 2023/2024 and \$93.36 in 2025), the principle of applying a stormwater fee to conservation lands remains a concern. In other jurisdictions where municipalities levy stormwater fees, conservation authority lands have been exempt, recognizing their important role in water absorption/infiltration, flood mitigation, and ecological value.

Charging the GRCA a stormwater fee for Cobourg Conservation Area—a property that functions as a natural sponge — undermines the Authority's ability to maintain and protect

lands across the watershed and devalues the role of natural spaces such as Cobourg Conservation Area in their role of green infrastructure to support flood mitigation. This approach undermines the long-standing application of good faith that has been foundational in the relationship between the Town of Cobourg and GRCA.

**Conclusion:**

Given these circumstances, staff recommend invoking the escape clause (#13) in the existing agreement and providing notice to the Town of Cobourg that GRCA will terminate the agreement effective December 31, 2025. Staff will also prepare a plan to transition the Cobourg Conservation Area toward a more naturalized state, consistent with the management of other GRCA-owned lands.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

**THAT** the Board of Directors direct staff to invoke the escape clause in the Memorandum of Understanding dated May 29, 1990 effective December 31, 2025.

Prepared by:

  
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Linda J. Laliberte, CPA, CGA  
CAO/Secretary-Treasurer