

OSWCA brings water reform message to Queen's Park

By Don Wall May 20, 2016

Bolstered by a comprehensive new report on their sector, members of the Ontario Sewer and Watermain Construction Association (OSWCA) descended on Queen's Park this week seeking support for policy reform.



Ontario Sewer and Watermain Construction Association president Sam Morra (left) meets with provincial Minister of the Environment Glen Murray and OSWCA executive direction Giovanni Cautillo during a reception at Queen's Park on May 16 as OSWCA unveiled a new report on water and wastewater policy. - Photo: DON WALL

The study, titled Bringing Sustainability to Ontario's Water System, was co-authored by Michael Fenn, whose resume includes service as deputy minister under three Ontario premiers, and economist Harry Kitchen, professor emeritus at Trent University who has completed more than 100 articles and studies on governance.

The report contained numerous recommendations on water and sewer policy but the OSWCA leadership opted for two main messages as they lobbied cabinet ministers, MPPs and policy advisors in teams on May 16.

OSWCA president Sam Morra summed up the key points in an address during a reception held in the main legislative dining room.

"Some estimates put the water infrastructure deficit at \$40 billion and it grows by about a billion dollars per year," said Morra. "The OSWCA has looked at this gap and we think there are two major things that have to happen. Number one, we need to keep the infrastructure gap from widening, so we need a single line item in the provincial budget dedicated to water and wastewater infrastructure, just like they have in the federal budget.

"And number two, we need to keep the gap closed by having a water regulator here in Ontario."

Morra explained that a new water board — operating similar to Ontario's energy regulator — would ensure rates are sustainable and that revenues would be reinvested into the system instead of being diverted into other uses.

The OSWCA was supported at Queen's Park by other construction-sector leaders such as Canadian Construction Association president Michael Atkinson, Andy Manahan, executive director of the **Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario**, and David Frame, director of government relations for the Ontario General Contractors Association.

"Programs like this, to identify the need to have the infrastructure in place to provide the quality of water that Canadians want, are important," said Atkinson. "We have to be constantly involved in ensuring that the infrastructure that produces that is well maintained and expanded where necessary."

In their report, Fenn and Kitchen referenced a landmark 1990 study also prepared for the OSWCA in gauging how much progress had been made in the last quarter century. The 1990 report called for greater use of water meters, a commitment to the user-pay principle and financial sustainability in water rates. Use of water meters is now at 98 per cent of households in Ontario, Fenn said, which is admirable, but he added there's more to system sustainability than that.

"The reason metering makes a difference is that you can't manage what you can't count, so if you know how much water you are pumping and how much sewage you are treating, if you know what your costs are and how many customers you have and what their consumption is, you can figure out how much you should charge for a utility like that, and approach it like a utility," he said.

Kitchen said Ontario's municipalities have varied pricing policies and so that level of government is going to have to become more sustainable, with more conservation encouraged, given that when there is less demand for water the need for new infrastructure is diminished.

The report pointed out that many of the recommendations emerging from Justice Dennis O'Connor's 2002 report on the Walkerton crisis have not been addressed and that with new challenges, "from climate-change impacts to extreme weather events, there is a need to link the silos of water, wastewater and stormwater planning" with an integrated approach.

While speakers such as Liberal MPP Peter Milczyn, parliamentary assistant to Minister of Economic Development Brad Duguid, and NDP infrastructure critic Taras Natyshak praised Ontario's system as being among the best in the world, and the government points to recent legislation and agreements such as the Lake Friendly Accord and the Great Lakes Protection Act, they and OSWCA members said there is still much work to do.

"We are doing OK," said Kitchen. "And that may be the problem. We need a catastrophe. That is an awful thing to say, but when you get a catastrophe it is pretty clear what you have to do."

Others in attendance offered ample evidence that Ontario is already on the brink of a Walkerton-type breakdown. Speakers including Morra noted that after rainfall in Toronto, 36 times in 2014 raw sewage had flowed into Lake Ontario; in London, just in March, 59 million litres of raw sewage had poured into the Thames River; and floods in Toronto and Burlington disrupted

commerce and spread sewage throughout residential areas, causing \$1 billion in damage and causing a spike in insurance premiums of 20 per cent.

John Currey, project manager for the Mississauga firm Earth Boring, had spent the day knocking on doors at Queen's Park for OSWCA.

"After a major rain event, when we have thousands of litres of effluent flowing into our rivers, lakes and streams, we have to take a step back and say, is this swimmable, drinkable, fishable?" he said, repeating the slogan of OSWCA partner Lake Ontario Waterkeeper.

"It was about awareness," said OSWCA executive director Giovanni Cautillo. "It was about information. Some of the positions we brought forward were unknown to them, when we talked about contaminants and pathogens in the water."

"With a lot of politicians, they are not aware of the combined sewer overflow problems that we have, but others are," said Morra. "Especially the Minister of the Environment (Glen Murray). He is very aware of the issue and said he wants to meet with us again and look at putting forward some ideas on reducing the overflows."