

# Will Patience Be Rewarded?

On December 9, 2009, a private member's bill was introduced by former Minister of Public Infrastructure Renewal David Caplan to "sustain and encourage improvement in Ontario's water and wastewater services and to establish the Ontario Water Board." It was somewhat surprising, albeit pleasantly so, that Caplan saw fit to push for a piece of legislation that is long overdue. For those with longer memories, in late 2002, the former Tory government had introduced similar legislation (SWSSA) that never went into effect because political direction was not given to develop the critical regulatory framework.

The Residential & Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario (RCCAO) believes that Bill 237 contains a number of important elements that lay the groundwork for creating truly worthwhile and transformative legislation that will provide the necessary guidance to municipalities to provide for "full cost recovery" for both the capital and operating elements of public water and wastewater provision. We therefore submitted correspondence to Premier McGuinty in January to express our support for the Bill and asked the Ontario government to undertake consultation with interested parties.

Post-Walkerton, many studies concluded that a move to full cost recovery would

- Lead to even higher safety standards for local drinking water (and hopefully even lower bottled water consumption);
- Result in less leakage in the water system;
- Lower energy costs that are wasted through pumping good drinking water that never reaches our taps (40-50 per cent loss rates in extreme cases);
- Foster a new conservation awareness through time of day and seasonal metering (similar to smart meters for electricity usage);

- Encourage rates that are realistic over the longer term (monthly water utility bills would probably be only a few dollars higher for the majority of residential users);
- Decrease property damage (such as old pipes bursting in winter and flooding basements or shutting down the power grid); and
- Help to address sewage overflows and a host of other environmental issues.

Bill 237 proposes a new governance model be instituted through an Ontario Water Board (OWB). It could be comprised of provincial, municipal and civil infrastructure representatives. The OWB could be given oversight responsibility to ensure that sustainable water and wastewater infrastructure policies are driven forward. This would include the development of long-term financing and rate setting approaches as well as conservation strategies that can be imbedded in local utility practices. The board would be particularly useful to smaller municipalities or a collection of smaller municipalities that might not have the management expertise to develop sophisticated asset management approaches or even the economies of scale to head down this road.

RCCAO reminded the Premier that if Ontario really wants to be "leading edge" with respect to our international counterparts, we need to develop better infrastructure performance benchmarks. In addition, the adoption of sustainable water and wastewater systems through Bill 237 will be integral to the successful implementation of regional economic prosperity efforts and to the goals envisioned in the Places to Grow legislation where growth is directed to priority areas. This model for water and sewer services has been on the Queen's Park to-do list for many years. Will our collective patience be rewarded?

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