



Recommendations in TSW report prove the panel listened

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The panel considering the future of the Trent-Severn Waterway seemingly pleased everyone in the Highlands when it released its report, "It's all about the water," on April 28.

In the space of a year, the six-member panel, including Haliburton's Greg Bishop, listened to hundreds of presentations, read thousands of pages and put in months of work, returning 26 recommendations to the federal Minister of the Environment, John Baird.

"It was an education on everybody's part," Bishop says. He is a land-use consultant and has been a member of the Ontario Municipal Board.

"In a sense, that's why they wanted a representation from up here: to educate the other people on the panel. They got educated when they came to the two meetings in Minden and Haliburton, there's no question," he said.

The panel was convened in response to a May 2006 private-member's bill in the House of Commons asking that the future of the TSW be considered. A year later, the panel began its work, holding 30 public meetings in 16 communities.

"We had well over 200 presentations. I think we ended up with 18,000 pages of submissions. Leafing through and getting an understanding of everyone's concerns, it was quite a task," Bishop says.

In the end, the document managed to please just about everybody in Haliburton County with its strong emphasis on water conservation, accountable and transparent water management and an obvious attempt to understand the struggles people on the reservoir lakes go through on a daily basis.

It was also very critical of the governance structure of the TSW, which includes much duplication of service while having no consistent legislation to operate under.

"There is not great confidence, Minister, in the performance of governments with respect to management of the waterway system," the report reads.

"We also believe that it is no longer appropriate for one government to manage storage and flows of water and another to manage allocation. Nor do we think that Parks Canada is well equipped to be in the water management business," it continued.

This clarity of vision is what most lake representatives are thrilled with.

"My initial impression is that we're hugely relieved and encouraged by what they've come up with. They've tackled a very difficult set of problems in a very mature way," said Kennisis Lake Cottage Owners' Association director and TSW liaison, Chris Riddle, who presented to the panel.

"They've recognized the overarching importance of managing water at the watershed level and that if there was one thing we asked them to do, that was it. They've done that in spades," Riddle said.

His only criticism was that the panel did not explore what watershed management would look like.

"One of the principal things we had asked for was a recognition that when you draw down Kennisis Lake by six feet, you expose navigational hazards that put boaters at risk, especially when you take no responsibility for the rocks that are exposed. They entirely ducked that item," he said.

Riddle stressed that he didn't expect the panel to solve all of the issues in this report and that he was impressed by their overall effort.

David Pengelly, a cottage owner on Soyer's Lake, was likewise happy with the report.

"I'm an enthusiast for the work the panel has done. I think it has been put squarely in the lap of the minister that these recommendations are in need of implementation," Pengelly says.

He says that when the panel was first formed, it caused some skepticism from lake associations because it never mentioned the reservoir lakes on its website or research documents. The resulting report, which was filled with references to Haliburton's lakes, was a welcome surprise.

"I was ... absolutely amazed at how strongly worded it was, how it had actually captured our concerns and I think the concerns of a lot of other people," Pengelly says.

According to the report, the waterway was constructed between 1833 and 1920, and includes 44 locks, 160 dams and water control structures and 41 reservoir lakes in the Haliburton Highlands. The infrastructure is worth \$1.4 billion, and will cost the government hundreds of millions of dollars to bring it back into shape over the next 15 to 20 years.

From the public, the panel heard that water quality in the entire system is deteriorating and that there isn't as much of it. Invasive species and increasing weed growth and disappearance of wetlands have been troubling to those on lakes.

"At the sessions we heard repeatedly about the high level of frustration with the performance of governments in managing the Trent-Severn Waterway system," the report says. It also noted that the system does not generate money just from the boaters who use the corridor, but also from the seasonal and permanent waterfront residents who "generate more than \$1 billion in economic activity and \$240 million in municipal property taxes each year."

It recommended creating two new governance structures: an independent water management agency and a heritage region council. For Coalition for Equitable Water Flow chair, Bonnie Fleischaker, these recommendations are right in line with the region's needs.

"Those two, to me, are the absolute right first steps. The regional council would have the capability of letting groups like the Coalition participate on the advisory committees that would report to that council. That's where we would air our local problems. Not just the lakes, but also the rivers," she said.

She also praised the report for its emphasis on education and conservation. Her one concern is that politicians won't implement the recommendations.

"For some reason, politicians in general don't seem want to go out on a limb about the environment and I don't know why. I know some of the decisions aren't going to be popular, but you know what? It's reached a point where it's not a popularity contest – these things have got to get done," she said.

Local MP Barry Devolin said he can't give any timeline for implementation of the recommendations. Those who are analyzing the report haven't had the time to make any decisions about its feasibility, he said, though he noted his own enthusiasm for the report and the independent water management agency.

So far, the federal Conservative government has pledged \$63 million over five years to get some of the infrastructure recommendations implemented.

"If someone was to ask me today exactly where the \$63 million is going and how is it going to roll out over the next five years, and how much of it will be spent on rebuilding dams in Haliburton County versus rebuilding locks in Kawartha Lakes, that's not possible to answer today, because the people who are going to be asked to come up with the implementation plan just got the draft report yesterday," Devolin said April 29.

David Pengelly says that any politician who may be thinking of ignoring the panel's report should think twice, since support for it is so overwhelming.

"The minister, I would suggest, will put this report on the shelf at his or her peril," he says.