

Conservation plan gets both praise and criticism

By STEPHANIE THIESSEN

The Champion

The delicate balance between development and the environment was one of the hot topics at Conservation Halton's (CH) recent Earth Week open house and discussion forum surrounding its draft strategic conservation plan.

"Conservation Halton faces many challenges as it moves forward with its strategic conservation plan," said Brian Penman, Milton councillor and CH chair. "Our ability to deal with these challenges will depend on how we're able to integrate our conservation actions with growth."

The open house, held April 21 at CH's administration centre in Burlington, provided visitors with a presentation on the draft plan as well as a chance to ask questions and offer feedback before it's finalized.

The plan, *Toward a Healthy Watershed*, is a combination of the environmental agency's long-term strategic directions and current priorities. It was created in 2002 and updated late last year.

The draft plan identifies 48 proposed conservation actions including developing a co-ordi-

nated approach to conservation, developing a source water protection plan and caring for streams and lakes to prevent contamination.

There are three main goals of the plan, Mr. Penman said — to create a watershed with healthy ecosystems to protect the health and quality of life of its residents, to provide quality and financially sustainable recreational opportunities and to strive for excellence in the area of governance and management — including creating financial stability.

Several Milton residents at the presentation gave suggestions on how to improve the document and encouraged more accountability for CH.

Campbellville resident Bob Beyette raised some questions.

"We want less bureaucracy, more environmental and ecosystem protection and we want it for less tax dollars. It's really that simple," he said. "Does this draft plan give us what we want, or does it just show what Conservation Halton wants?"

Mr. Beyette also mentioned the importance of

more residents getting involved with CH, and allowing citizens — not municipalities — to vote councillors to the board of directors.

Several residents addressed the format of CH's financial documents and urged that they be more readable to the public.

Mike Grimwood of the Milton Rural Residents' Association said he wanted to see more financial clarity in the plan.

"I can't see exactly how the money is being spent," he said.

John Vice, chair of CH's new finance committee, responded that the issue of clarity is being addressed. He said the Region of Halton recently requested that CH work on the format of its budget, which sparked the formation of the finance committee.

"We were challenged by the Region to have more understandable documentation," Mr. Vice said, adding the 2006 budget will be submitted in the new format.

Jim Faight, a Milton resident and environmentalist, offered some suggestions, but said it's a good plan.

"I applaud this plan — it's first class. Your \$14 million is going a long way," he said, referring to CH's 2005 budget of \$14.8 million.

Throughout the evening, Mr. Penman emphasized the importance of a joint effort between CH and the public.

"We are committed to an open and collaborative process with our draft conservation plan and feedback is critical in helping us achieve our mission of protecting the natural environment for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations."

An on-line survey of the draft plan will be available on CH's Web site at www.conservationhalton.on.ca until mid-May to give people who couldn't attend the meeting a chance to comment.

"All feedback on the plan will be reviewed by Conservation Halton prior to approval of the final document," Mr. Penman said.

The plan is expected to be approved by the board in June.

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