

Accountability ensures government puts environment work ahead of games

This article by Graham Saunders was originally published in the Chronicle Journal on May 13, 2019. Graham Saunders is the president of Environment North.

The Environmental Bill of Rights and the position of Environmental Commissioner was passed into law in Ontario 25 years ago. It established legally that people in Ontario had the right to participate in government decisions that affect the environment. It was a shift from historical development policies that often ignored or downplayed environmental and social costs. Problems still linger on (notably local and regional issues with mercury), however people and the environment in Ontario are generally healthier today because of this legislation.

The Environmental Commissioner of Ontario had a similar role of oversight of government conduct and practices as the auditor-general over finance and an ethics commissioner has over conflicts of interest and behaviour of politicians.

Environment North's annual general meeting this year features Dianne Saxe. Until a few weeks ago she was the Environmental Commissioner of Ontario. Her position and [the office of the environmental commissioner] were eliminated by the Ford government on March 31, 2019.

Saxe is recognized in every Canadian and international legal rating service. As environmental commissioner of Ontario she was described as a “tough but fair watchdog” over compliance with the Environmental Bill of Rights.

For the past decade the Environmental Commissioner of Ontario has also issued annual reports on the Ontario government's progress in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Making progress on climate change policy is not getting easier in Canada, in spite of the Paris Accord, an international agreement that attempts to limit global warming to 1.5°C.

Forest fires and flooding scenarios are frequent news items. Reports of “Canada warming twice the global average” and that there are “only 12 years left to turn the emission trend around” are routinely ignored by some provincial governments.

The recent ruling by the Saskatchewan Court of Appeal found in favour of the Federal government rather than the province of Saskatchewan. Most judges concluded that climate change is “national concern” and that the federal carbon pricing mechanism is within the constitutional rights of the Federal government.

Premier Doug Ford commented “That’s Game One. We still have other games to play.” The Ford “games” includes a legal challenge by the province of Ontario and then the Supreme Court as the deciding “game”. The price for his games is already more than \$30 million.

Many readers know that the Ford government has dismantled many environmental policies and regulations. Immediately after the election last June they withdrew Ontario from the cap and trade agreement with California and Quebec and cancelled hundreds of renewal energy projects and various “green” incentives.

One of the perceived impediments to the Ford “Open for business” enticement was Environmental Commissioner Dianne Saxe and her staff. This was a formidable target because Dr. Saxe’s 5-year appointment as Environmental Commissioner of Ontario was unanimously approved by the legislature on September 2015.

“My office was abolished on March 31, 2019 by special legislation, one of 18 occasions that I counted where the government has used special legislation to immunize itself from paying compensation for breaking legal arrangements, such as breach of contract, misrepresentation, and breach of the securities act.”

Meanwhile there is no new comprehensive climate change plan in Ontario. The Made-in-Ontario Environment Plan near the end of 2018. The plan weakened the greenhouse gas reduction target for 2030 and commitments that are likely not to be realized.

Dr. Dianne Saxe will discuss how “Climate Changes Everything” on Thursday, May 16, 2019 in the Faculty Lounge at Lakehead University. Environment North is cohosting this event with EarthCare Thunder Bay and the Lakehead University Office of Sustainability. All are welcome to attend. The presentation will begin at 6:45 pm.

Environment North invites the public to come early and attend the Environment North AGM at 6:00 PM. Light refreshments will be available. Admission is free for current Environment North members. For non-members the admission fee is \$10.00 or \$5.00 for students at the door. Parking is free.

The Environment North website at www.environmentnorth.ca has more details.