

Fighting the Trashing of the Thames

Over the past four years, residents of Oxford County have directed over 77,000 letters to Queen's Park as part of a campaign to stop a mega-dump from coming to our region. The proposed landfill would receive 850,000 metric tonnes of garbage annually from across Ontario for a 20-year period, potentially contaminating groundwater and endangering vulnerable species.

Grassroots organization OPAL Alliance (Oxford People Against the Landfill and partner organizations) has been fighting since 2012 to stop this project. The proposed landfill, which would be located adjacent to local aquifers and to the Thames River, would not only pose a threat to drinking water, but also potentially threaten the downstream nesting grounds of endangered spiny soft-shelled turtles along the Thames. "We are working hard to protect and recover this species," says Scott Gillingwater, species at risk biologist for the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority. People worry that any additional river contamination will put the progress to date at risk. Snapping turtles, listed as Special Concern, also reside in the river and would be exposed to the same risk through decreased reproductive success due to environmental contamination.

The conservation authority's latest report card in 2012 gave the river's overall health a D. Also concerned about the impact are the Chippewas of the Thames First Nation, who depend on the river downstream for drinking

water, fishing and recreation.

Walker Industries, the company that would own and operate the landfill, assures residents that it will take all precautions to ensure there are no negative impacts. The landfill is slated to receive garbage from industrial, commercial and institutional origins, with brownfield soil as cover.

However, a mega-dump flies in the face of five years' work by the local council to move Oxford County to the forefront of environmental stewardship. Oxford has committed to produce zero waste by 2025, leading the way for the rest of Ontario.

More broadly, OPAL President Bryan Smith believes that the province's Waste-Free Ontario Act makes more mega landfills unnecessary. "With the enactment of Bill 151, a system will be created to divert more waste from landfills, create jobs and help fight climate change," he says. The oversight body is working on strategies for avoiding and eliminating waste with a view to a zero-waste future for Ontario. To achieve these goals Ontario would work towards systematically avoiding and eliminating volume of waste, while maximizing the conservation and recovery of resources. Mr. Smith does note this will require a period of broad dialogue across the province on public education, awareness and cooperation as to how Ontario chooses to manage our collective waste, knowing garbage-based pollution affects our environment and our health.



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