

Public ignored in Great Lakes water management talks

Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy study urges government organizations focus on incorporating citizens into decision-making process rather than just gaining their approval on decisions already made.

(Toronto, December 3, 2004) In a report released today titled Public Participation in Water Management in the Great Lakes: Provincial and Joint Initiatives, the Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy (CIELAP) charges the public is being shut out of the water management decision-making process in Great Lakes jurisdictions. The report argues that citizens could have a far more influential role in determining the future of their communities and water resources, but do not because the public participation guidelines to which Great Lakes government organizations are generally subjected are rarely implemented.

The report, prepared by Jolante Rasteniene, studied a number of major Canadian organizations involved in the management of the Great Lakes, and found that the public involvement process is often poorly prepared and is exercised without sufficient resources. The study suggests communities would be better equipped to participate in water management strategies by well organized, transparent long-term programs with clear goals and feedback mechanisms, and recommends that:

- All Great Lakes watershed management activities, including individual projects and public involvement, should be coordinated by a central agency which would unify available expertise
- Agency guidelines for public participation should include a learning environment, as well as creating related institutions to facilitate further knowledge development
- The public should be regularly updated on the progress of major regulatory developments
- Public participation plans should be fully integrated into program strategies and strictly enforced in the understanding that they provide the means for capacity building
- Public participation costs should be estimated for each project, and the sources of funding should be predetermined and guaranteed for the duration of a particular project
- Priorities should be focused on building relationships and understanding between participants to ensure long-term viability for individual projects
- Federal or/and provincial funding should be made available
- Resources should be made available for innovative projects and community research

"We are concerned because citizens are led to believe they do not have a say in the way their water resources are managed," says CIELAP Executive Director Anne Mitchell. "The agencies dealing with watershed management in the Great Lakes, for the most part, are ignoring directives that should give weight to what affected citizens

think, which produces a feeling of helplessness. Promises to include citizens are often not lived up to, largely due to unpredictable funding and a lack of commitment. That is a serious breach of our citizens' environmental rights. Watershed projects could achieve so much more with well prepared and well funded public participation."

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Founded in 1970, the Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy is an independent, not-for-profit research and educational organization whose mission is to provide leadership in the research and development of environmental law and policy that promotes the public interest and sustainability.

The Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy has for been commenting on and monitoring policy and regulatory changes related to the environment for 30 years.