

[thestar.com](https://www.thestar.com)

## **'We can't plan for our future': Doug Ford's government wants to dump more sewage into Lake Ontario. Local residents think there's a better solution**

*By Noor Javed* Staff Reporter *Fri., April 30, 2021* *timer* 7 min. read

9-12 minutes

---

Paul Wealleans loves living along Lake Ontario — except when algae season arrives every summer, bringing black sludge to the beaches near his Ajax home.

"There are days when it builds up on the shoreline, and you have to wade through it," said Wealleans, who led a decade-long community effort to see provincial upgrades to the Duffin Creek Water Pollution Control Plant (known as the "Big Pipe"), which treats sewage from York and Durham regions, and eventually releases into Lake Ontario. "It smells and it's disgusting."

His concerns about the water quality are back, amidst rumours that the province shelve York region's plans for a state-of-the-art wastewater treatment plan that would allow it to process sewage in-house along Lake Simcoe.

After years of studies and consultation on the Upper York Sewage



Solution, the province told Durham and York last year that it was now considering a solution that would instead send millions of litres more of York's waste to the shores of Ajax and Pickering along Lake Ontario.

In 2014, York Region submitted its environmental assessment to the province for the new York facility, an estimated \$628-million wastewater plant being built to provide sewage capacity to 153,000 people in Aurora, Newmarket and East Gwillimbury. The project was initiated after the Liberal government at the time asked York to consider a local solution.

Seven years and \$100 million later, York is still waiting for approval from the Ministry of the Environment Conservation and Parks to move ahead.

York region municipalities say the province's delay has left their development plans in limbo, with insufficient sewage allocation to properly plan their communities. Durham, meanwhile, questions why it should have to bear the brunt of another region's growth.

"Why should Ajax and Pickering have to pay the price so they can develop 150,000 new homes in York Region?" said Ajax Mayor Shaun Collier.

## **YOU MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN...**

"Maybe they should be looking at solving their sewer capacity problems before they approve their development," said Collier.

"And they shouldn't be looking to off-load it to another municipality."







The seemingly difficult decision of dealing with residents' dirty business has many asking if the province should be pushing growth without the infrastructure in place to support it.

Environmentalists say the demand for new sewage capacity is a symptom of the province's flawed approach to development.

"This is part of a bigger issue we are calling the big sprawl, and we are seeing these infrastructure issues across the province," said Phil Pothen, a program manager for advocacy group Environmental Defence. "The province's insistence on pushing forward with either of these options is part of their agenda of diverting population and job growth to areas where it will make land speculators and sprawl developers richer, rather than diverting those funds to the existing neighbourhoods which desperately need investments to improve services and aging infrastructure."

The Big Pipe was built in the '70s and '80s, mostly to serve the growth in landlocked York Region. Currently, 80 per cent of the sewage at the Duffin plant comes from York, while 20 per cent is



from Pickering and Ajax.

According to recent staff reports to York and Durham regional councils, the province's decision on the new York sewage plant was expected in 2016.

The same year, the province met with the Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation, who live on the island in Lake Simcoe, as part of its duty to consult with Aboriginal communities who have treaty rights which may be negatively impacted by the proposed project.

In 2018, a York Region staff report attributed the approval delay to this consultation process. But at the time, the First Nations group said it too had been waiting for months for the province to seriously engage them after the file was assigned to four ministers in a period of five months.

The Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation did not respond by deadline to requests for comment for this story.

In July 2020, Ontario's Environment Minister Jeff Yurek sent a letter to the York Region chair, saying the ministry had "received comments from the Chippewas of Georgina Island," yet the province was now looking at alternatives, including a potential southern option to Lake Ontario.

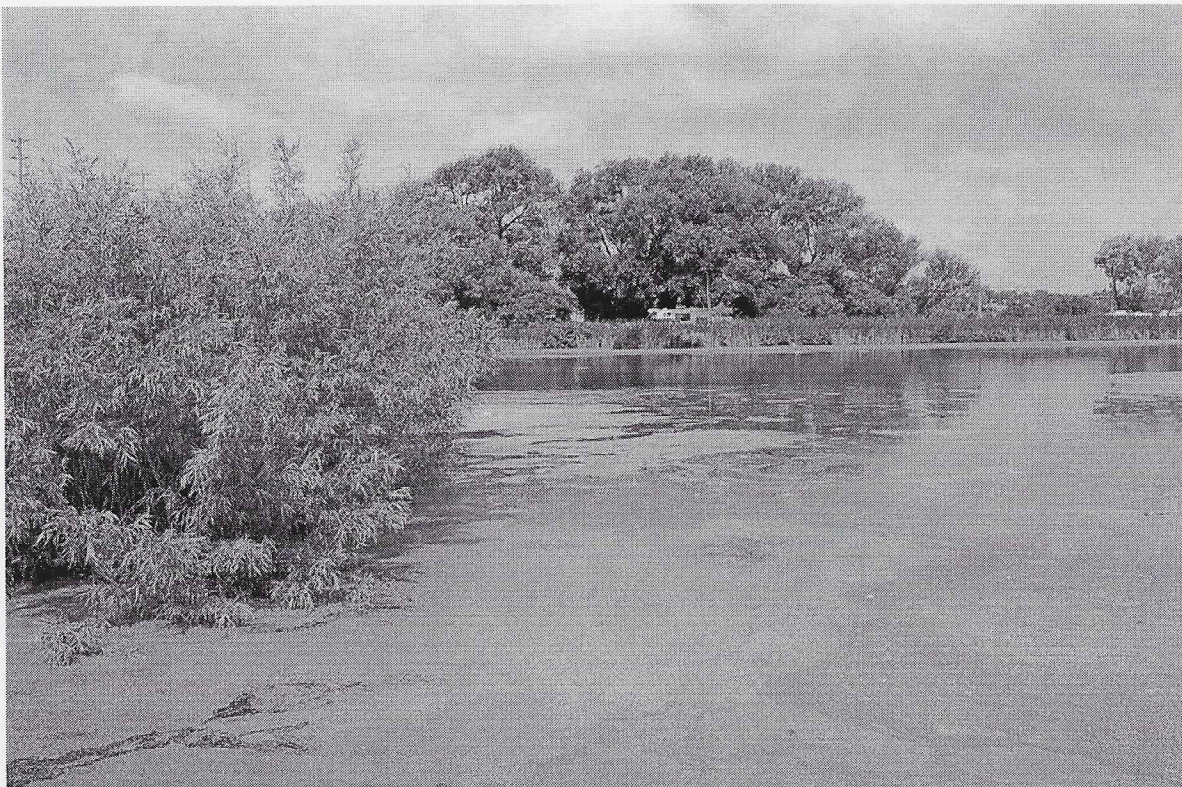
According to a staff report to Durham council, officials were informed months later that "under a nondisclosure agreement initiated by the province, discussions had been ongoing with York on a provincially preferred Lake Ontario alternative," the report says. "Provincial officials also indicated the importance of implementing the solution on an expedited basis."

The province confirmed this month that discussions are ongoing:



“A decision has not been made on the Upper York Sewage Solutions environmental assessment application,” said Gary Wheeler, a spokesman for the Environment Ministry. “We remain committed to working collaboratively with the York and Durham Regions to help find a responsible permanent solution that will address both regions’ needs while safeguarding the environment.”

Local environmental groups have long expressed concern about the proposed York sewage plant on Lake Simcoe — particularly how its effluent could add to the phosphorus into the fragile ecosystem. Forty-million litres of treated sewage would be released daily into the East Holland River, and eventually into the lake.



## YOU MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN...

But Robert Baldwin, the chief administrative officer for the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority said the proposed facility is



“scientifically” the better option, as the “water that will be released will be so clean that it will significantly improve water quality in the Holland River.” He noted that already 15 sewage treatment plants dump into the lake.

## Don't miss big news when it breaks

Get up-to-the-minute breaking news alerts in your inbox from the Star.

Conventional sewage treatment in Ontario consists of two levels, including one that removes large particles, and uses biological processes to remove organic compounds from the water.

The proposed York plant would have a third and fourth level of treatment, which would also remove viruses, bacteria and protozoa — essentially “disinfect” the water. It would result in two effluents, one a high-purity reclaimed water, the other a low-nutrient reclaimed water that can be used in farming or discarded.

Baldwin added that the expanded Lake Ontario option would require digging under the environmentally sensitive Oak Ridges Moraine. “We also take the position that you should take care of your business in your own backyard,” he said.

Ajax Regional Coun. Joanne Dies said if the province wants to add another pipe to bring more sewage to Lake Ontario, they should also upgrade the technology used to treat 630 megalitres of sewage, the current capacity of the plant.

“If they twin that pipe, they are going to add a lot of effluent going into the lake,” said Dies.







Currently, the Duffin Creek plant only has secondary treatment, despite the efforts of Ajax residents and politicians to get the province to install tertiary treatment that would remove many of the remaining nutrients such as phosphorus.

In 2014, Ajax spent millions for an expert to look at the impact of a potential plant expansion on the water quality of Lake Ontario. That expert determined that phosphorus from the plant was responsible for the seasonal algae.

However, a 2019 provincial report found otherwise — and said tertiary treatment was not recommended, nor regulated for sewage plants on any of the Great Lakes in the United States or Canada.

A York Region report from 2019 said that the technology for the Duffin plant removes more than 94 per cent of raw sewage phosphorus entering the plant. It would cost between \$250 million and \$300 million to upgrade the plant, according to a recent memo from Durham region staff.

Dies said Durham council passed a motion earlier this year asking



the province to apply all of the “environmental benefits and conditions proposed for the Upper York Sewage Solutions” to the Duffin Creek solution as well — and asked for a full rationale as to why the province has changed its mind. She also noted the province has yet to release a design or cost analysis of the Lake Ontario option, or have a public consultation process.

East Gwillimbury Coun. Lorelea Carruthers said her community just wants a decision to be made.

Carruthers said most of the sewage allocation available for her town has already been distributed.

“At this point, we can’t plan for our future,” said Carruthers. “We’re delayed as long as the decision is delayed.”

They also can’t clean up the past — specifically, lagoons filled with raw sewage that remain in commission in Holland Landing — until a decision is made on the proposed York facility.

“How we have put in all this growth, and still have open sewage lagoons is beyond me,” said Carruthers. “Any solution that we look at, shutting down the lagoons has to be the first priority.”

Environmental Defence’s Pothen says the shift to Lake Ontario is likely related to the idea in the province’s mind that its “capacity to accommodate sewage is greater than Lake Simcoe’s,” he said.

“So, it does offer greater scope for sprawl from an infrastructure perspective if they extend south,” he said.

Ajax mayor Collier said it’s also worth asking why after 10 years and \$100 million being spent on the Upper York proposal, the province would look to Duffin Creek.

“I will tell you why... it’s because of political pressure,” he said,