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Give cities more say over quarries: Miller

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Ontario's environmental commissioner says the province must resolve policy conflicts that contribute to making quarry siting "one of the most difficult and controversial land-use decisions being taken in Ontario today."

He also urges the government to give cities such as Hamilton and Burlington more say over where new quarries can be opened and old ones expanded.

Gord Miller, in his newly released 2006-2007 report, says the St. Marys Cement application for a large limestone quarry in northeastern Flamborough is an example of the conflict between provincial policies on aggregate extraction and environmental protection.

The Greenbelt Act and other laws call for protection of wetlands, forests and farmland, and the Greater Golden Horseshoe Growth Plan calls for an as-yet undeveloped strategy for wise use and conservation of aggregate, but other policies say pits and quarries can be sited almost anywhere and that municipalities can't require applicants to demonstrate need for new sources.

The commissioner notes the St. Marys site is inside the greenbelt's natural heritage system and contains several provincially significant wetlands, significant woodlands and water resources features, including the recharge area for municipal wells serving Carlisle.

He then recommends the government develop a new mechanism under the Aggregate Resources Act (ARA) to screen out, at an early stage, proposals that conflict with identified natural heritage or source-water protection values.

In an interview yesterday, he said: "The essential point here is that the ARA process is very deterministic. It's extremely difficult to get to a no even if you have a site with all kinds of environmental impacts. If the applicant persists, you always get to a yes."

Listing arguments against the St. Marys site, he asked: "How many things do you have to have before you decide it's an unsuitable site?"

He maintained there should be an expedient process for ruling out unsuitable sites without wasting time and money on a long, drawn-out battle.

And, while the report doesn't mention Nelson Aggregate's proposal to expand its quarry on the Niagara Escarpment in north Burlington, Miller notes that every application for a new or expanded operation on the escarpment has been granted since the 1985 protection plan was adopted.

The commissioner -- who is independent of the government and reports directly to the legislature -- says conflicts with other land uses and community interests are heightened because of a provincial policy stating that aggregates should be extracted as close to market as possible.

"The inherent conflicts between aggregate production and the protection of natural areas arise because many of the highest-quality aggregate deposits in southern Ontario are found in areas of great ecological and social significance. More than 75 per cent of aggregates used in the greenbelt area come from the Niagara Escarpment and the Oak Ridges Moraine plan areas."

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