

## **Quarry expansion appeal will test McGuinty Cabinet's environmental mettle**

*by Bradley Shaw*

The McGuinty government has lost so much ground on the environmental front stemming from recent decisions on the electricity supply crisis that one has to question whether they can recover in time to win enough environmental votes in the October 2007 election. A Cabinet decision expected later this month on a Niagara Escarpment quarry expansion may well prove to be a bellwether for how seriously the Liberals want to try to regain a measure of credibility on the environment file.

The combination of the government's abandonment of a fixed date to shut down the coal-burning power plants, its embrace of nuclear power and its decision to exempt its plan for new electricity supply, including new nuclear plants, from any provincial environmental assessment has already cost the Liberals dearly. They may be beyond redemption amongst many environment-first voters, but if McGuinty and his Cabinet sincerely want to repair their tattered green cloak, they must refuse the expansion of Dufferin Aggregates' Milton Quarry on the Niagara Escarpment west of Toronto. It's big – at 1,156 acres, the existing site is the largest active quarry in Canada. It's ecologically significant – the 205-acre expansion would carve up the escarpment's continuous natural corridor. And turning it down would seem to be a political no-brainer since it's smack in the middle of the Liberals' much-heralded Golden Horseshoe Greenbelt that resulted from a 2003 election promise.

A Niagara Escarpment Commission dominated by provincial Tory appointees supported the quarry expansion back in 2002. If the same application went before the commission today, populated as it is with much greener, Liberal-appointed members, it would get a rough ride. Bolstered by the 2002 commission support, a hearing board, after an 82-day public hearing, approved the quarry expansion one year ago. Two environmental intervenors in the case – the Coalition on the Niagara Escarpment and Protect Our Water and Environmental Resources – appealed the board's decision to Cabinet, citing a long list of ecological and land use planning reasons why Cabinet should turn it down.

The quarry property is part of the Halton Forest, the largest tract of continuous forest along the Niagara Escarpment south of Grey County and the largest intact upland woodland in the Greater Toronto Area. And just as nuclear power carries with it the risk of thousands of years of high-level radioactive wastes, the Dufferin quarry expansion would involve massive engineering works that would need to operate successfully forever in order to attempt to protect the water resources of the area – the wetlands, creeks and groundwater tables.

Why jeopardize the ecological integrity of the Greenbelt for centuries to come just for a mere 10 to 12 years of quarrying? There will always be a demand for more aggregates – stone, sand, gravel and products made from them such as concrete and asphalt – for road-building and urban growth. But as a society, we must look long and hard at whether we

are doing enough to reduce that demand through more compact urban development, more public transit instead of more highways, and the recycling of aggregates.

Recycled sources can provide about five times more of the aggregates needed for public-sector road and development projects in Ontario per year than would be extracted from the Dufferin Aggregates quarry expansion area each year. With so much at stake politically, and viable alternatives to the quarry expansion in the wings, it makes us wonder what could possibly propel the Cabinet to approve the quarry enlargement other than the enormous influence that the aggregate industry wields at Queen's Park.

The provincially legislated Niagara Escarpment Plan, first approved in 1985, regulates development to protect this 725-kilometre-long ribbon of natural space extending from Niagara Falls to Tobermory. Cabinet could amend the plan to allow the Dufferin expansion. The Liberal government has not yet had to make any big, tough decisions about protecting the escarpment – part of the Greenbelt – since coming to power in 2003. The electrical power decisions appear to signal that environmental protection may no longer be a high priority for McGuinty's government. Approving the Dufferin Aggregates quarry expansion would be an equally strong signal.

The question is whether McGuinty's Cabinet truly appreciates the uproar in the environmental community that approving the quarry expansion would cause, and how much they care.

*Bradley Shaw is executive director of the Coalition on the Niagara Escarpment (CONE), an umbrella group founded in 1978 and representing 30 environmental and community organizations.*