Land Use Planning  
Based on Groundwater Protection in Waterloo

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Since 1994, the Region of Waterloo has been implementing a Water Resources Protection Strategy (WRPS) to minimize the impact of historic, existing, and future land uses on municipal water supplies. A safe and secure long-term water supply is critical to the quality of life of existing and future residents, and is a key to attracting new investment to the area.

In November 1998, Regional Council endorsed the concept of Sensitive Groundwater Area designations and principles to manage new non-residential development. Proposed sensitive groundwater areas included those close to municipal supply wells (Wellhead Protection Sensitivity Areas) and other regional aquifer recharge areas. The proposed policies are based on state-of-the-art groundwater mapping and more than three years of consultation with local planning staff and the Water Resources Protection Liaison Committee.

The policies consider the time it takes for groundwater to travel through the aquifer to regional wells, and the sensitivity of these wells to possible point sources of contamination. They also consider the potential hazards to groundwater posed by new non-residential land uses. Unlike the zoning process in the United States, which permits the regulation of chemicals, the Planning Act in Ontario is based on regulation of land uses. Within this regulatory environment, restrictions on a specific chemical must begin with the identification of processes that either use the chemical or produce it as a by-product. These processes must then be linked to specific land uses, and the land uses linked to zoning categories. Thus, the policies contend that more stringent controls are needed close to the wells, where the risk of impact to groundwater is the greatest.

It is important to note that the policies apply only to new non-residential development, and do not apply to residential development, agricultural operations, or the current activities of existing businesses. Alternative approaches involving education and financial incentives are being implemented to reduce the risk posed by existing businesses and agricultural operations.

Residential development will be the subject of further phases of the Water Resources Protection Strategy.

Since early 1999, the draft policies have been refined further through extensive consultation with residents, stakeholder groups, and area municipalities. The proposed amendment has been circulated to area municipalities and the Province for comment. It is currently anticipated that the revised ROPP amendment will go before Regional Council by early 2001. Final approval of this amendment would trigger local official plan and zoning by-law amendment processes, which are anticipated to take twelve to eighteen months to complete.

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