

June 6, 2006

## ONTARIO'S ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT PROCESS: A PRIMER

The *Environmental Assessment Act* (EA Act) promotes good environmental planning by assessing the potential effects of infrastructure projects before the first shovel goes into the ground. The act applies to most public and some private projects, including roads, landfills, water and sewer undertakings, and electricity projects.

The EA process serves several important purposes by:

- Allowing projects to receive input from a wide variety of sources, including the federal, provincial and municipal levels of government, stakeholders and the public.
- Identifying potential problems prior to construction
- Promoting good environmental planning practices
- Improving community acceptance
- Better protecting the environment.

The Ministry of the Environment's EA program has three major processes.

1. **Individual environmental assessments:** these apply to large, complex projects with the potential for significant impacts on the environment, such as major landfills. Proponents must prepare a Terms of Reference, which serves as a work plan to guide and focus the preparation of an EA. These represent less than five per cent of all applications.

The majority of EAs follow one of the two following processes:

2. **Class EAs:** these are for specific project types or classes and are based on the potential for environmental effects. Municipal roads, water and sewer, forest management, highways and GO Transit each have their own EA process. The government is proposing to give transit projects their own EA process.
3. **Electricity generation and transmission:** the EA rules for these types of projects are set out in the Electricity Projects Regulation. Depending on the environmental impacts and the type and size of the project, proponents must either undertake an individual EA, a screening process or have no EA requirement. The screening process has been used for more than 30 generation projects since 2001.

## **Improving the EA process**

Many stakeholders say the individual EA process has become too lengthy, costly and complex, with many small- to medium-sized projects subject to the same level of review as large, complex projects.

Individual EAs are seen as the primary cause of delays in approving provincially significant infrastructure projects, such as waste facilities and transportation projects.

In June 2004, the government created an advisory panel, comprised of experts from academia, industry, the legal profession and municipalities. The panel was asked to provide recommendations on improving the EA process, with a focus on three sectors – energy, waste and transit/transportation.

The government is proposing improvements to the EA process to better support the implementation of a secure electricity supply, better public transit, made-in-Ontario waste management solutions, and infrastructure to meet growth projections.

The panel's recommendations, along with those from municipal and private sector EA practitioners, guided the government's action plan for EA improvements.

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