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More Than 60 Ontario Groups Call For Protection From Lawsuits Designed to Muzzle

Demand grows for law to protect public participation in wake of recent suit against health advocates

Toronto – More than 60 Ontario groups released a letter to Premier McGuinty today asking him to move forward with a new law to protect citizens from lawsuits designed to stifle legitimate public participation in the democratic process. Such suits are often called strategic lawsuits against public participation, or SLAPPs.

"Many of us in the environmental movement have suffered when public participation in the democratic process was threatened," said Gideon Forman, Executive Director of Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE). "So we support anti-SLAPP legislation based on our first-hand experience."

Environmental Defence initiated the letter and had experience with a SLAPP itself when a partner group it works with was sued for opposing a development at Big Bay Point on Lake Simcoe.

"It's courageous enough for citizens and small organizations to stand up for what they think is right," said Dr. Rick Smith, Executive Director of Environmental Defence, "But to be sued for participating in what is supposed to be a democracy? That's scary."

Many of the 60 signatories to the letter have experience with a SLAPP, which can put victims in the position of either backing down or losing everything. The letter to Premier McGuinty concludes that legislation is the best measure to protect Ontarians' rights: "As a community of organizations, we feel our democratic rights are threatened by the existence of SLAPP suits and insist that the only way to protect our right to public participation is through the creation of effective legislation."

Ontario would be joining Quebec, where similar legislation passed last year, and over half of American states that currently have anti-SLAPP laws.

Support for creating such laws has snowballed in recent months, notably with the release of the Environmental Commissioner of Ontario's Annual Report in October. Commissioner Gord Miller labeled SLAPPs a threat to public participation and called on the government to create effective laws to prevent them.

Shortly after, the Association of Municipalities of Ontario resolved to meet with the Ontario government to find solutions to prevent SLAPPs and to avoid undue costs placed on citizens in Ontario Municipal Board hearings. The Association acted after 62 municipalities, including Mississauga and Hamilton, passed resolutions calling for anti-SLAPP legislation, and requested the Association support them.

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For more information, or to arrange interviews, please contact:
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