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## Time to stop Trillium fund money waste

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Last Updated: January 14, 2012 12:00am

One small section of Auditor General Jim McCarter's report last month received surprisingly little coverage.

Lost amid the insurance boondoggles, weird LCBO purchasing practices and a scathing indictment of green energy projects, was a searing report on Trillium Foundation grants.

Established in 1982, Trillium provides grants to community groups across the province.

In the 2010-11 fiscal year, Trillium distributed about 1,500 grants worth \$110 million.

McCarter looked at how these grants were doled out and monitored - and found the system severely lacking.

Troll through the grants on Trillium's website, and you're left scratching your head as to how taxpayers ended up supporting some of the organizations.

In 2004-05, for example, a private yacht club in Toronto got \$100,000 to buy "sailing dinghies and a safety boat to enhance beginner sailing programs for children and youth."

Why are taxpayers funding this? If a private sailing club wants to offer such programs, surely its members should pay to purchase the equipment.

In 2004, Fatal Light Awareness Program (FLAP), a group that's trying to develop "bird friendly" buildings by getting folk to turn out their lights, received \$175,000 over five years.

Then in 2011, they got another \$82,000.

According to the Trillium website, the money is, "to hire a volunteer and outreach co-ordinator who will increase public engagement, create new volunteer opportunities . . ."

OK, but surely a volunteer is just that - a volunteer. In any other organization, a volunteer works for free and doesn't get paid \$82,000.

Never mind. I'm sure the birds are happy.

Never one to let a government slush fund go untapped, in 2009 the David Suzuki Foundation scored \$129,200 over two years "to develop a financing model to stimulate the green economy and energy retrofits by researching and pilot-testing Local Improvement Charges (LICs) in three to five Ontario municipalities." Mmmm. I feel greener already.

The auditor was scathing in his criticism of the way the grants were handled.

More than half the organizations didn't have sufficient receipts to support the amounts they said they'd spent.

"In almost all cases, the organizations could not provide evidence of the hours worked or what actual work was undertaken by people in the funded positions," said his report.

A grant of \$73,000 was provided to an organization for air quality tests, including \$31,600 for salaries and \$23,000 for equipment.

"We found little evidence of any work done - except a recording of eight hours of visits to two schools over a year," the report said.

A non-profit housing corporation received \$48,000 to help integrate youth from its community into the wider population. The grant supported a range of recreational activities, "including makeup lessons and outings involving skiing, laser tag and mini golf."

A soup kitchen got \$26,000 for landscaping and \$12,000 for steam cleaning equipment. Auditors found only \$2,600 spent on landscaping and the steam cleaning equipment was nowhere to be found. Unapproved renovations were done instead.

I'm sure some very worthwhile organizations get funding for laudable purposes.

But thousands of small community groups do just as good work - and raise funds privately.

This year is crunch time for the budget.

Economist Don Drummond - hired by the government to find savings in programs - has warned some ministries will see 30% cuts to funding.

I think he could take his knife to Trillium first.

Some of those grants are for the birds.

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