



Rainy Lake Conservancy President's State of the Union Message: December, 2012

Dear Members of the Rainy Lake Conservancy,

Our best wishes from my wife and I to all of you in this snowy 2012 holiday season.

Please let me take a few minutes to bring you up to date on the activities of the Rainy Lake Conservancy and to briefly provide my assessment of where we stand as an organization.

Since I last communicated to you – at the July 2012 Annual General Meeting – and before that in the last newsletter, the organization has remained on the course set in our 2009-2015 Strategic Plan. So, in keeping with the themes described therein, we have focused discussions, work, and funds on holding in trust key pieces of land, or land easements. And, in relation to that, but – it is important for me to note – also in relation to our larger goal of “working to preserve and protect the natural beauty, historic features, ecological and recreational values of Rainy Lake,” we have worked on a variety of other appropriate education, advocacy, and fundraising opportunities.

The work of the Conservation Easements/Land Securement Committee has been crucially led by Phyllis and Dale Callaghan. They have worked assiduously with an array of legal and non-legal advisors, and with the donors (the White family), so that we now are on the doorstep of receiving our first land conservation easement. We believe there are only a few small legal formalities remaining before the matter is concluded.

Concurrently, we have continued other committee work on relevant matters such as: (i) review and input to Ontario's policies for Crown Land Management, (ii) input and advocacy related to the proposed Namakan River dams, (iii) input to the International Joint Commission's watershed plan, (iv) research and input related to a Canadian Heritage River designation for the Rainy Lake basin, (v) input to the Nature Conservancy of Canada's regional plan, (vi) input to various mining project reviews, (vii) attendance at local conservation events, (viii) co-funding of various scientific studies, and so on.

I hope you agree, all of the foregoing is important work that is consistent with and positively contributes to our mission.

At the same time, we have made substantial progress towards making our administrative function more self-sustaining. Key to this, I am very pleased to report we now have Ms. Chery Wilson, as the Rainy Lake Conservancy's Administrative Assistant, as well as Ms. Kelly Sigurdson of Stewart and Sande Chartered Accountants in Fort Frances ON and Justine Whitehead of Stikeman Elliott in Ottawa ON providing, respectively, pro bono bookkeeping and legal services. These individuals play a vital role in our operations and provide an excellent standard of service.

I have a great gratitude to Mary Lysne, our Secretary and Communications Director, for her indefatigable work to search for and then to train Chery for the staff support position. Phyllis

Callaghan and Bob Hammer supported Mary in this task.

And, I am sad to report, Mary has decided the time has come for her to retire from her various roles in the Conservancy. There will be time to speak of Mary's long history of invaluable service in other reports and at the next Annual General Meeting. In brief, I note that over the past fifteen years, Mary has played a vital role in almost all of the areas where the Conservancy has achieved positive results. Her service to the organization has been stellar; she certainly deserves a rest; we will all miss her very much.

Let me turn to my assessment of the Rainy Lake Conservancy as an organization. We have many strengths, such as: (i) our track record of achievement, partly described above, (ii) we are on a solid footing financially – at least for the next few years – and this is largely due to the work of the Cross-Border Donations Committee and the donors who have responded so generously, (iii) we have excellent staff support, and have in place sound operational practices, (iv) collectively, we have a large store of knowledge and contacts.

Meanwhile, there are a few “weaknesses” I perceive and which should be noted. Top of the list is the fact we continue to be unsuccessful finding individuals to take on the various executive officer positions. Specifically, at present, these are the roles of President-elect, Secretary, and Communications Director. This means some of the remaining officers have had to take on double duty. Obviously, such a situation is not sustainable over the long term, and it creates an unfair burden on the officers who continue to serve. In the eighteen months remaining of my tenure as president, it is imperative, I believe, we make significant progress towards overcoming this problem.

However, I am pleased to report we have recently re-formulated the Nominating Committee and tasked it with the job of alleviating the foregoing concern. In this regard, stay tuned, and you may hear from us in the next few months. If you don't, and would like to learn more, please do contact us to discuss.

Two other matters of concern: (i) although the Conservancy manages to cover a wide scope of issues of concern to our members, (as described in the first half of this report) I have a growing concern that unless we see a fairly large influx of new volunteers to serve on the various committees, in the medium term, we may not be able to engage on those topics. This means, I believe, the Conservancy would be forced to downsize its scope, for example, to act solely as a land trust. At present, I am not certain such is the will of our membership, but we may have no other choice. My personal opinion is there is both a high demand and high need in the basin for input from an organization like the Rainy Lake Conservancy to cover a wide range of topics. Regrettably, I am uncertain whether we will be able to locate sufficient volunteers to sustain our involvement.

Next: I feel confident we will encounter in the years ahead a number of “opportunities” and “threats,” for example, either the opportunity to purchase a key piece of land for conservation purposes, or a threat such as a significant change to Ontario's or Canada's policies for land use management in the basin. Should either of these arise, it is my view we are not, at the moment, particularly well prepared to respond. By raising this point, I am not suggesting it is time to panic, indeed far from it, but I do think that these kinds of opportunities and threats should come into our discussions and plans in the not too distant future.

In conclusion, I want to emphasize I do believe our passion for Rainy Lake will carry us through, and that there are bright days ahead. In a sense, our only real obstacle is finding enough of the right individuals to carry on the work of the organization. This is not a huge task, and there is some time. And, I should emphasize that I remain fully committed to completing my term as your president.

I thank all of you for your various contributions and input to the organization, whether big or small. We have made solid progress on many fronts. There is good reason to be optimistic about the years ahead.

I am happy to discuss any of the foregoing with you at any time.

Best Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Stephen Challis". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Stephen Challis, President
Rainy Lake Conservancy