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Submitted photo

The City of Waterloo and the Grand River Conservation Authority are investigating the draining of a locally significant wetland and pond at Creekside Church, 660 Conservation Dr.

By James Jackson

Chronicle Staff

Staff from the City of Waterloo and the Grand River Conservation Authority (GRCA) are investigating the draining of a locally significant wetland on the Creekside Church property over the weekend.

The wetland is on the west side of the church property and photos sent to the Chronicle by Waterloo resident Deb Swidrovich show a trench was dug from the pond to a nearby stormwater sewer. A backhoe is still visible in some of the photos.

A parishioner of Creekside Church, 660 Conservation Dr., told Swidrovich about the work and she scrambled over the weekend to contact city staff, the GRCA and the Ministry of Natural Resources.

Robyn McMullen, a City of Waterloo environmental policy planner, said the city is “looking into it in concert with the GRCA.” Since wetlands fall under the jurisdiction of the GRCA, they will be the lead agency on the investigation, McMullen said. “We’re certainly working together to figure out if there were any previous approvals that might have been related to this feature and where everything pieces together,” she said.

Dave Schultz, manager of communications with the GRCA, said any time someone wants to alter a designated wetland they must first receive a work permit.

“It’s too soon to know if any permit was issued” for the work at Creekside Church, Schultz said. Staff are investigating if one may have been issued in the past and the work is just being carried out now.

If work to alter a wetland is done without a permit, the GRCA adds 50 per cent to the cost of the permit application. Fees can range from \$380 for minor work to \$8,360 for major projects.

Calls to Creekside Church were directed to Executive Pastor Chris Burge, but he could not be reached for comment by deadline.

McMullen said a comprehensive subwatershed study completed in 2013 identified the pond and surrounding marsh as a locally significant wetland. The pond is about 2,100 square metres and is surrounded by 2,300 square metres of wetland.

Based on aerial photography dating back to the 1930s the pond is likely of natural origin and not an artificial stormwater management pond, the study found.

No species of regional, provincial or national importance were located in the pond but Swidrovich — a well-known environmental advocate in Waterloo — said it is an important habitat for frogs, turtles, muskrat and other wildlife.

Swidrovich said she has been fighting to protect the wetland for more than seven years and all that work was undone over the weekend.

"It's really, really disappointing," she said Monday morning.

After asking an employee of the church about the draining of the pond she was told the City of Waterloo gave permission for a drainage pipe to be installed back in 2002.

McMullen said the city is looking for those records as part of their investigation, but couldn't say how long it might take to find any answers. "It's a top priority but I don't have a timeline."