

BUDGET COMMITTEE

Thursday, August 20, 2026

**Ausable Bayfield Conservation Authority Boardroom
Morrison Dam Conservation Area**

DIRECTORS PRESENT

Ray Chartrand, Adrian Cornelissen, Steve Herold, Jaden Hodgins, Dave Jewitt, David Marsh, Wayne Shipley, Marissa Vaughan

DIRECTORS ABSENT

Joey Groot

STAFF PRESENT

Elizabeth Balfour, Andrew Bicknell, Aaron Clarke, Tina Crown, Cassie Greidanus, Abbie Gutteridge, Davin Heinbuck, Brian Horner, Ian Jean, Tracey McPherson, Nathan Schoelier, Mari Veliz

CALL TO ORDER

Chair Ray Chartrand called the meeting to order at 9:30 a.m., welcomed everyone in attendance and read the Land Acknowledgement Statement.

ADOPTION OF AGENDA

MOTION #BD 76/26

Moved by Steve Herold

Seconded by Marissa Vaughan

“RESOLVED, THAT the agenda for the August 20, 2026 Board of Directors Budget Committee meeting be approved,”

Carried.

DISCLOSURE OF PECUNIARY INTEREST

There were no disclosures of pecuniary interest at this meeting or from the previous meeting.

DISCLOSURE OF INTENTION TO RECORD PROCEEDINGS

None.

PROPOSED 2027 BUDGET

Acting General Manager Nathan Schoelier provided an overview of the 2027 budget preparation by staff, as well as the format for the information session. Each department will present the budget for their program and a summary of the individual projects that are proposed for 2027. The five-year forecast will also be presented with the draft budget. Staff prepared the budget with a 2.8% wage increase on the pay grid, as defined by the recently developed Pay Grid Adjustment Policy approved by the Board of Directors in April 2026. Overall, in the 2027 Proposed Budget, staff leverage 3.5 dollars for every levy dollar. As is typical, there will be some fluctuations in grants. The Proposed Budget does not include funding for any new staff in 2027.

Corporate Services

Nathan Schoelier presented the consolidated Corporate Services budget and provided an overview of the services provided by this department. In general, Corporate Services provides assistance to all departments, the Board of Directors, the Foundation, Land Trust, municipalities and the general public, and is responsible for the coordination of the body of the ABCA. A new project proposed for 2027 is listed under Administration Centre Major Maintenance, and includes two components. The first is an upgrade of the Administration Centre's HVAC System, and the second is an upgrade of the Administration Centre's security camera system. The current HVAC system is comprised of three furnaces and associated air conditioning units for each. One of the furnaces, as well as all air conditioning units are original to the construction of the building. The current security camera system was installed in 2016, and therefore the technology is aging. It is proposed that the cost of these upgrades be split evenly between the Category 1 Operating Levy and reserves.

Education

Cassie Greidanus, Conservation Education Coordinator, presented the Conservation Education budget. Revenue for providing effective and meaningful outdoor education experiences comes from the municipal levy, program fees, donations, foundations, and fundraising. Staff promote environmental awareness through classroom programs, field trips, day camps, the water safety awareness program, community presentations and special events. In 2026, staff increased the number of weeks of nature day camp offered in the summer, due to increased appetite for this service in the community. She also noted that there have been good grant opportunities in 2026, and some of those grant dollars are lined up to aid the 2027 budget for conservation education programming.

Floodplain Management

Andrew Bicknell, Water and Planning Manager, presented the four main components of the floodplain management program, which are all Category 1 programs. They include the maintenance of 16 erosion control projects, 7 flood control projects, the flood forecasting and warning system and the Port Franks ice management project. Since 1996, these projects are eligible for a 50% grant from the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR); however, for 2027 it is estimated that the MNR funding will only cover 14.7 – 17.2% of the actual program cost. In 2027, there are no new projects

proposed under these programs. However, the Port Franks Ice Management and Erosion Control ongoing projects are to continue. These projects include the annual channel configuration monitoring, which is eligible for a small grant from the MNR, as well as inspection and maintenance of the Armstrong West erosion control efforts. The remaining funds for these projects will come from the Category 1 Operating Levy, as well as the Special Benefitting levy.

Environmental Monitoring

Mari Veliz, Healthy Watersheds Manager, Andrew Bicknell, Aaron Clarke, GIS/IT Supervisor, and Tracey MacPherson, GIS/IT Coordinator, presented Environmental Monitoring and the Planning and Regulations program project factsheets and budgets. In some cases, funds are deferred to the following year to meet the funder's year end. Mari Veliz explained that some projects are fully funded through other partners, but that the project levy contribution often leverages other sources of funding, some substantial, to undertake environmental and monitoring projects. While more grants may become available as the year continues, they are not included in the Proposed Budget.

Some of the ongoing projects will continue in 2027, such as the CA Maps Project, Core Dataset Updates and Maintenance, Water Monitoring (including both provincial and local programs), Planning, Permitting and Regulations work, Drain Review and Fisheries, Low Water Response, Spills Response, Healthy Watersheds projects and Ausable Bayfield River Stewardship. The GIS and IT related projects support all staff in their daily work. Mari noted that there is an increase in Category 3 levy funding, as this is a Watershed Report Card year, which occurs every five years, and gives a snapshot of the overall base conditions of the watershed. Another new project includes updates to the Shoreline Management Plan through Photographic Monitoring Stations. Students from the University of Waterloo presented this program to the Board of Directors in June 2026, and staff believe that the installation of several of these stations will be helpful in monitoring the condition of the shoreline as it changes, and will be useful for climate change research.

Drinking Water Source Protection

Elizabeth Balfour, Drinking Water Source Protection (DWSP) Program Supervisor presented the Drinking Water Source Protection budget. There are no levy dollars allocated to the Drinking Water Source Protection budget, as the Province funds ongoing mandatory implementation responsibilities for Source Protection Authorities. The implementation body for each source protection policy coordinates implementation costs. The current approved budget is in place until March 2027, at which time staff will submit another 3-year workplan and budget to the Ministry of Environment, Conservation and Parks.

By agreement, ABCA delivers Risk Management Services for eight municipalities. The current agreement expires at the end of 2026, but staff have liaised with municipal staff, and all eight municipalities have agreed to another three year service agreement (2027 – 2029)

Property Management & Recreation Services

Nathan Schoelier, noted that the Property Management and Recreation Services program is one of the longest standing programs of the ABCA. The primary goal of the program is to manage lands for conservation and to help mitigate the impacts of natural hazards. However, these lands are also valued by the community for various recreation opportunities. The ABCA owns 3720 hectares of land and includes management areas, conservation forests, agricultural land, as well as conservation areas (CAs). These lands contribute to the health of the watershed by promoting forest cover, surface and groundwater protection, flood control, aquatic species and wildlife habitat and community well-being. Revenue is generated from timber harvests, farmland rental and the Parkhill CA campground lease, as well as gate fees at Rock Glen Conservation Area, and hunting permit sales. This revenue offsets the cost of property taxes, insurance, risk management inspections and property maintenance.

In 2027, staff will be continuing with some ongoing projects, including invasive species management, as well as updating management plans for the conservation areas. New for 2027 are some major maintenance projects at some conservation areas. These include replacing the current the playground structure with “natural playground” structures at Clinton CA, creating an accessible trail loop at Parkhill CA in partnership with Friends of the North Middlesex Trails, and reconstructing a section of the stairs at Rock Glen CA.

Private Land Stewardship

Ian Jean, Stewardship and Forestry Specialist, reviewed the private land stewardship budget wherein staff provide one-on-one technical advice, site visits, and assistance with paperwork in connecting landowners with cost-share funding to maximize grants for their stewardship projects. ABCA staff aim to help complete at least 100 projects each year and typically do more. Expenses in the stewardship program are offset with tree sales, providing tree planting plans, phragmites management spraying and forest management plans for private landowners. Pending funding, some of the cost share programs that may support projects include Forests Canada, Lambton County Stewardship Program, Perth County Stewardship Program, the Habitat Stewardship Program and Resilient Agricultural Landscapes Program.

Vehicles and Equipment

Nathan Schoelier presented the vehicle and equipment motor pool budget. There is no operating levy required for the vehicle and equipment budget as the revenue received when charging mileage and equipment rates to the users’ programs offsets expenses. At the September 18, 2025 Board of Directors meeting, a policy was passed that ties ABCA’s mileage rate to the Federal rate. In 2027, the Vehicles and Equipment Program budget accounts for the replacement of the 2016 Dodge Caravan in ABCA’s motor pool.

Operating Levy – Category 3

Nathan Schoelier presented the proposed operating levy for Category 3 projects for 2027 at \$197,557 as compared to \$168,057 in 2026. This includes ongoing, phased, and new projects proposed for 2026. The Operating Levy – Category 3 dollars will be leveraged with other sources of funding to undertake projects totaling \$1,487,015.

Operating Levy – Category 1

The Operating Levy for Category 1 programs proposed for 2027 total \$1,378,994 in comparison to \$1,347,884 in 2026.

Proposed 2027 Budget

Staff prepared the budget using a pay grid with an increase of 2.8% for cost of living, as per the principle laid out in the Pay Grid Adjustment Policy. Nathan Schoelier also presented the fee schedule. As part of the Conservation Authorities Act Update, there is a freeze on fees related to permitting and regulations, however, ABCA was able to implement a reasonable increase in February 2026 before the new fee freeze came into effect. The combined Operating Levies (Categories 1 and 3) and Capital Levy total \$1,636,696 (5.18 per cent increase) as compared to \$1,556,035 in 2026. Nathan reminded the directors that not every program area is sustained by levy dollars, and that levy dollars leverage further funding from other sources.

Nathan also presented the five-year forecast, noting that in the five-year forecast the initial budget for 2027 was an 11.91 per cent increase over 2026, but through staff discussion, the increase was decreased to 5.18 per cent.

As the July CPI was released following the budget preparation, the Board of Directors ask that staff adhere to the policy, and use the CPI rates from May, June and July to adjust the Pay Grid. This will bring the increase up to 3%. However, all Directors noted that they would be more comfortable with a budget increase in 2027 between 3 and 4 % over 2026, and asked staff to investigate some ways to bring the budget down, such as using more from reserves or interest earned on investments.

MOTION #BD 77/26**Moved by Jaden Hodgins****Seconded by Adrian Cornelissen**

“RESOLVED, THAT staff review the Proposed 2027 Budget and investigate options to bring the overall budget increase closer to 3%.

Carried.

Further direction and discussion will be held at the next Board meeting on September 17, 2026.

NEW BUSINESS

- 1) Nathan Schoelier noted that at the end of July, the Province posted the proposed composition of Regional Conservation Authority Boards on the Environmental Registry of Ontario (ERO). While the reasoning behind the proposed composition does include representation from every upper and single tier municipality, the numbers should be based on actual watershed population size rather than a percentage based on the area that falls within the watershed boundary. Staff have developed some comments and plan to send them to the Board as an email vote, as the ERO posting will close prior to the next Board of Directors meeting. Board members asked that staff copy local MPPs on our comments, once approved.
- 2) Chair Ray Chartrand reported that ABCA will be hosting the first official Transition Committee meeting for the Lake Huron Regional Conservation Authority. It is planned for September 3, 2026.
- 3) Jaden Hodgins asked if there was potential for Board members to acquire some ABCA branded clothing as a legacy to the organization, as the logo and name will eventually be changing.
- 4) Staff asked Board members for feedback from today's presentation. Some Board members asked to change the wording of "Deferred From/To Prior" year to "carried forward" or something similar, for clearer understanding.

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting was adjourned by Jaden Hodgins at 12:24 p.m.

Ray Chartrand
Chair

Abigail Gutteridge
Corporate Services Coordinator