

Brief to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities
about the Shoreline Erosion Study

Hello,

As soon as I took office as the Member of Parliament for Berthier—Maskinongé in 2019, the erosion of the St. Lawrence River banks was one of the most important and recurring issues I had to deal with. Not only citizens but also several municipalities in the riding have asked for my support.

Many lands are shrinking year after year, eroded by the waters. Owners have no support from the federal government. Some riverside municipalities, such as St-Ignace-de-Loyola, were even forced to carry out emergency work to preserve sections of road. These expenses were paid by the municipalities, often to avoid being isolated or landlocked. However, they have not been reimbursed by the other two levels of government. These are huge amounts of money for such small municipalities. They have very limited financial capacity, and this work was undertaken for the sole purpose of ensuring public safety.

The failure to recognize shoreline erosion as an emergency situation that may result in costs to those affected is, in my opinion, a serious injustice. This is the reason why I have been supporting citizens' initiatives for the past three years and why I was pleased to sponsor the petition initiated by Roy Grégoire, a citizen of St-Ignace-de-Loyola. This petition was tabled in the House of Commons on June 3, 2022, and had over 800 signatures. A series of resolutions of support from municipalities and RCMs was also sent to the Minister. The text of this petition, as well as the disappointing response from the federal government, are attached to this brief.

We are all well aware that the St. Lawrence Seaway is a central economic vehicle for Quebec and Canada. The revenues that come from this route also come with responsibilities for governments, including the responsibility to participate in shoreline protection work—or at least to fund it. Citizens and municipalities should not have to endure all this uncertainty when they have no control over the factors that cause this situation, either directly or indirectly.

The banks are receding by an average of 1 to 2 metres per year. This loss not only compromises the integrity of the riverbanks, but also endangers the homes of residents as well as several types of municipal infrastructure. The events in St-Ignace-de-Loyola mentioned above are a good example.

We all know that the tonnage of boats transiting the river is constantly increasing, proportionally increasing the waves on the banks and, therefore, the actual and potential damage. Despite this, dredging work has been carried out by the federal government to allow for even larger vessels. This only amplifies the effects on our shorelines.

Citizens and municipalities feel alone and powerless, and the federal government, through its constitutional jurisdiction over navigation and commerce, is largely responsible for the damage caused to the shoreline. It is therefore imperative that a shoreline development support program be put in place to assist municipalities and citizens dealing with the problem. The latter are not equipped to deal with work of this scope and the complexity of the administrative and financial measures involved.

The federal government had established a shoreline protection program in 1956. It was abandoned in 1997. The structures and works dating from that time are now in a pitiful state of disrepair and are in dire need of work. Are we going to let citizens and small municipalities manage all the consequences of shoreline erosion on their land? In Berthier—Maskinongé, low walls that were built while the program was in effect are now largely underwater.

With the increasing effects of climate change, resulting in periods of drought that expose and erode the banks, and periods of heavy rainfall that drastically increase water levels and current strength, this problem is getting worse. High winds also increase the impacts, as does ice accumulation in the spring. The federal government has a duty to act, and it must do so urgently. Each year of neglect makes stabilizing shorelines that much more of a challenge.

Voluntary speed limits are not enough. We must act and act together. In addition to representing an investment of disproportionate sums compared to the means of our citizens and our small municipalities, work needs to be done in a coordinated way so that stabilizing one portion of land does not move the problem a little farther along. Work will therefore have to be supervised and organized by qualified professionals and scientists that only the federal government can afford. The future of our riverside communities depends on it.

The Government of Canada must re-establish a program to protect the banks of the St. Lawrence River and take adequate measures to counter erosion and ensure a safe environment, such as regulations imposing speed limits for different types of vessels and the installation and maintenance of riverbank protection infrastructure. Trust and cooperation must be built among the federal government, Seaway users and shoreline residents to make sure that every effort is made to limit the impact of seasonal flooding by ensuring that water levels are properly managed.

As a result of the committee's study, the issue is now well defined, as is the federal government's responsibility.

I am therefore calling on the committee members to make specific recommendations to ensure that a fair, equitable and adequate shoreline protection program is revived. There is an urgent need to recreate this necessary partnership among all parties in order to protect our shorelines and to properly support our people.

Yves Perron

Citizen and Member of Parliament for Berthier—Maskinongé