

Turn sewage treatment into resource recovery

CRD should hold an open design competition to encourage innovation

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The past few weeks have been eventful ones in the sewage debate in Greater Victoria. First was the release of the report by the Society of Environmental Toxicology and Chemistry, and then the B.C. government's directive to the Capital Regional District requiring it to come up with a sewage treatment plan by June 2007.

The latter resolved the question of whether we would treat our raw sewage, while the former did much to settle questions of why.

Still, I would like to address those who do still doubt the need for treatment, and explain why I support treatment, especially since these questions were recently raised in this newspaper ("A load of poop-la, but what will neighbours think?" July 15).



CREDIT: Ray Smith, Times Colonist
B.C. Environment Minister Barry Penner has expressed concern about contamination around the Clover Point sewage outfall.

I believe that at least secondary treatment of our sewage is necessary because what we have been doing is not sustainable, especially as our population grows. Further, I see sewage treatment as just one part of what should be a more comprehensive approach to the problems of ocean contamination and water management -- an approach I hope will someday include federal action to remove many toxic chemicals from circulation, entirely.

For now, though, pollution is defined in our laws, and in acting last week Environment Minister Barry Penner simply applied those laws to our region. The minister has also noted that contamination around the two outfalls is already bad enough to qualify for a preliminary designation of contamination.

As Canadians, don't we want our environmental laws to apply to all sources of pollution, whether they stem from industry or a city?

Opponents of treatment have long argued that dilution is the solution, but we also know that what goes into the ocean returns up the food chain through bioaccumulation. In fact, federal regulations such as the Fisheries Act do not recognize dilution, and the national sewage standard under development calls for secondary sewage treatment as a minimum.

The criteria that the CRD have used so far to judge whether our effluent has been

causing problems for sea life surrounding the outfalls were dismissed by SETAC as inadequate. As well, the SETAC report highlights just how much information has been missing from our monitoring.

We have inadequate reference sites for comparison and don't understand the fate and distribution of effluent.

The report also points out that the triggers to indicate when treatment is needed do not actually protect the environment.

Now that the region has been ordered to treat its sewage, the pressing questions have become how, where and at what cost?

These issues were placed before the CRD's core area liquid waste management committee on Wednesday.

I urge its members to explore the many exciting potential answers. In Kristianstad, Sweden, for example, they use biogas from sewage and solid waste processing plants to run their public buses and private cars.

In San Diego, purified water recovered from treated sewage is distributed for irrigation and industrial use. In California, sludge is converted to biofuels and minerals instead of being applied to land. In Vancouver, energy from sewage will heat the Athletes' Village.

In this age of climate change and high energy prices, it's time to shift from seeing waste as a disposal problem to seeing it as a resource recovery opportunity. It's being done elsewhere and we could do it here too.

All these ideas are consistent with the five-point Green Agenda the federal NDP launched in June, which would support local governments in their efforts to expand renewable energy options, as well as invest in sustainable transportation.

We don't yet know what treatment through resource recovery would cost.

I believe the best way to find out is for the CRD to hold an open design competition.

Toronto did this in 2003, and received 50 submissions on ways to convert its solid waste into energy, including turning sewage sludge and other organic waste into ethanol, natural gas, and biodiesel. Why not do the same? We should take advantage of Canadian and international design expertise to get the maximum environmental benefit and the best value for taxpayers.

A design competition is also an excellent means of addressing land use questions. So far, the treatment debate has been coloured by residents' fears of big, smelly treatment plants in their backyards. This is understandable given that traditional treatment plants have had large footprints. But modern technologies allow for more compact, self-contained, decentralized and odourless facilities, so location challenges may be easier to overcome.

Our region has a wonderful opportunity. We can leave behind the burden of environmental stigma, and instead become known for our environmental leadership. If we all work together toward the common goal of making our communities more sustainable, such a future is possible.

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