

Vaughn Palmer: Victoria's royal flush on sewage treatment endures

Millions of dollars down drain as plans stall, dump into international waterway continues

BY VAUGHN PALMER, VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST AUGUST 6, 2015



The capital region's failure to get a sewage treatment plant built is a result of territorial bickering and NIMBY proclivities, writes Sun political affairs columnist Vaughn Palmer.

Photograph by: DARRYL DYCK, THE CANADIAN PRESS

VICTORIA — There has been another embarrassing development in the slow-motion farce that passes for sewage treatment planning in the provincial capital region.

"Sewage program boss given \$500,000 send off, " read the headline in the Victoria Times Colonist Saturday, atop a report that project manager Albert Sweetnam had been axed along with the remaining staff at the ill-fated Seaterra project.

Putting the best face on all this was Victoria mayor Lisa Helps, who said the severance payout actually represented "a taxpayer saving of \$1.4 million" — there being no longer any project to manage.

"I want to emphasize he (Sweetnam) has done extraordinary work," added Brenda Eaton, chairwoman of the overseer commission for the project. "He's an outstanding individual, with outstanding negotiating skills. He has been incredibly professional and added value to the project."

That testimonial proved to be too much for one local resident, who wondered if the prime evidence of

Sweetnam's negotiating skills was the contract that paid such handsome severance in the absence of any vestige of a completed sewage treatment plant.

"Only on government contracts do you get a payoff if you fail," wrote Times Colonist reader Peter Gill in a letter published this week.

Still, the debacle left plenty of blame to go around. For the regional government, overseer commission and project managers spent some \$60 million on all manner of planning, branding (Seattera — think earth tones and sea breezes), community outreach, and developing a suspiciously precise \$782.7-million budget, without ever fixing a site for the actual treatment plant.

Oh, they thought they had one, at McLoughlin Point near the entrance to Victoria harbour. They even began clearing the ground.

Then, in June of last year, Esquimalt municipality refused to zone the point for the intended use, notwithstanding the capital region's offer of \$20 million in bribes — er, incentives — to do so.

Aghast, the region pleaded with the provincial government to overrule Esquimalt's not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) proclivities. The argument being that it would scarcely involve any political risk to the B.C. Liberals since Esquimalt, like every other community in the capital region, was already represented in the legislature by New Democrats.

But the Liberals were reluctant to set a precedent they might have to apply elsewhere — in, say, the far-from-hypothetical situation where Metro Vancouver wanted to impose a waste incinerator on a suburban community that was represented by the governing party.

So the province declined to intervene, Esquimalt stood fast, and the sewage treatment planning returned to square one, where it pretty much remains to this day.

Community consultations are underway. Ditto a search for a new site or sites, a somewhat desperate exercise given that the other options (including one near my backyard) have already been picked over several times.

Taking the lead from Esquimalt, Saanich recently indulged its own variation on the NIMBY sentiment, vetoing further consideration of an undeveloped 12-hectare site near the regional hospital because the land was in the agricultural reserve.

The one thing that is on the move is the budget, since delays in getting started are expected to add at least \$100 million to the price tag. But neither have local governments called off the tax collectors.

My neighbours and I in Victoria are still being dinged for a sewage treatment levy on our property taxes. Across the region, the levy is bringing in \$15 million a year to help cover the accumulated costs of the still-hypothetical treatment plant.

Federal and provincial taxpayers are also on the hook for a one-third share of construction costs. The federal commitment is set to expire next year, though the region is seeking an extension, a plea that may not fall on deaf ears in the current election campaign.

But even if the federal and provincial governments are prepared to indulge another round of delays, the region could be looking at serious fallout from south of the border.

The B.C. capital has long been under pressure from Washington state to cease the practice of dumping raw sewage into the shared waterway that is the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Mindful of the need to maintain cross-border relations, the capital region included a representative from Washington state on the overseer commission for the sewage treatment project.

She was Pam Elardo, director of the waste water treatment division for King County, the regional government that includes Seattle. And late last month, she resigned from the commission citing the lack of progress.

"A clear path forward at the local level to site and construct a facility backed by a firm mandate from the provincial government is not evident," Elardo wrote in her letter of resignation. "It appears that construction and operation of a waste water treatment system is now years, if not decades, away."

No word on whether her frustrations will translate into followup action from the county or the state. But one should note that the stalled sewage treatment plan has its roots in a 1993 accord between then premier Mike Harcourt and then governor Mike Lowry that was crafted to head off a threatened tourism boycott of the B.C. capital.

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