

# north shore news

## JAMES: Treatment plant doesn't need fixing

Elizabeth James, contributing writer

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Just  
**ASKING**  
Elizabeth James



*"There is no question it will eventually become common practice for cities to adopt building codes and regulations requiring new and retrofitted buildings to incorporate measures including ... wastewater reclamation and reuse to satisfy non-potable water demands within the buildings."*

— Troy Vassos, *Municipal World*, June 2014

When questioned about the lack of progress on a new Lions Gate wastewater treatment plant at a recent chamber meeting, North Vancouver-Seymour MLA Jane Thornthwaite replied, "I receive more phone calls from people asking when the traffic mess will be fixed than from people saying we really need to fix that wastewater treatment plant."

Amen to that!

One of the reasons for that, of course, is that anyone trying to move seamlessly around the North Shore can clearly see that a tri-municipal willingness to slow down and co-ordinate the rampant pace of development would have an immediate beneficial effect on traffic flow and congestion.

The other reason may be that, like me, those who don't call their MLAs about the plant agree with Troy Vassos, a North Vancouver senior environmental engineer and wastewater treatment guru who says, "People don't call because the treatment plant doesn't need fixing."

Vassos, a former member of Metro Vancouver's Lions Gate public advisory committee, has maintained that position from the outset. In fact, his answers were unequivocal when I asked for his reaction to a recent call from City of North Vancouver mayoralty candidate Kerry Morris for Metro to get on with the much-delayed secondary treatment project on the former B.C. Rail site at Pemberton Avenue and First Street.

"Politicians keep saying we have to push to have that deadline moved back," Vassos began. "That's just code for saying the federal government has recognized there are more critical public issues to be concerned about than blindly applying a federal regulation to Lions Gate to grow bacteria on food waste and pretend we're helping the environment," he said.

Vassos says there's not a shred of evidence that the effluent being discharged from the existing primary treatment plant is having any adverse effect on the marine environment at the mouth of the Capilano River — quite the opposite.

"That river is an important salmonid enhancement watercourse, yet there's no evidence the fish are being affected," Vassos explained. "In fact, within a few metres of the outfall discharge, no wastewater constituents can be detected," he said.

To explain — routine effluent monitoring tests for detectable levels of four main substances: biochemical oxygen demand, total suspended solids, ammonia and chlorine.

For our safety and to protect marine and land-based environments, federal, provincial and public health authorities have established strictly monitored regulations that govern not just the effluent from sewage treatment plants but also the wastewater collected in septic tanks and on-site wastewater treatment plants installed on residential and small commercial rural lands.

So, do we need a secondary treatment plant because the current facility is polluting the environment at its outfall? Absolutely not.

In fact, while reviewing the discussions we had just prior to my May 29, 2013 column What's the Point of Secondary Treatment of May 29, 2013, Vassos said the September 2013 Metro Vancouver Water Quality Control Annual Report concluded that all our regional wastewater treatment plants — including Lions Gate — "are operating with no adverse effects on the environment."

Translating that for anyone who wants to fast-track a \$700-million secondary treatment plant and using BOD readings as one example, Vassos said the current dilution rate of 2000:1 makes it "impossible to detect any wastewater contaminant in ocean waters."

"This means the BOD in the water at the existing plant is immediately reduced to 0.05 parts per million. That's 40 times lower than the detection limit and 500 times lower than the federal regulatory requirement — without spending one additional nickel!"

Since it's easy to document the lack of evidence to support the need for a new/relocated Lions Gate plant, what else could we get for \$700 million?

Well, there are two things we could do: one would be easy to achieve using current knowledge; the other far less so.

Taking the easy one first — Metro municipalities should do as they've discussed before: persuade the federal government that spending the money on infrastructure to divert that water and the pollutants it contains away from the rest of the wastewater being sent for treatment would go a long way to easing the load for all regional treatment plants.

As for the tough problem, Vassos referred me to the March 2010 Environment Canada paper Proposed Wastewater Systems Effluent Regulations, which stated, "Treated wastewater may contain grit, debris, biological wastes, disease-causing bacteria and hundreds of chemicals such as those in drugs and personal care products such as shampoos and cosmetics."

So how about we try to fix what needs to be fixed, instead of spending \$700 million to fix something that ain't broke?

*After 16 years with the multi-disciplinary Perinatal Programme of B.C. and later in various endeavours in the growing high-tech industry, Elizabeth James now connects the dots every second Wednesday on local, regional and provincial issues. She can be reached via email at [rimco@shaw.ca](mailto:rimco@shaw.ca) (<mailto:rimco@shaw.ca>).*

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