

‘E-TOWN’ RAISING A STINK OVER SEWAGE TREATMENT

Esquimalt gets stuck with plant; taxpayers could be left with a mess

(Esquimalt Mayor Barb Desjardins) said the vote was a “painful one” but reflective of a situation where the region had the financial equivalent of a gun to its head.

All through spring and into the summer, my neighbourhood in the provincial capital sprouted lawn signs pleading “Save Clover Point Park from a massive sewage plant.”

Clover Point, bordering on the water east of the more renowned Beacon Hill Park, is popular with sightseers, dog-walkers and kite-flyers, one of the latter being pictured on the sign against a background of deep blue.

As to why such a picturesque venue was thought to be in need of saving, it was merely the latest development in the long-running game of duck and cover that passes for sewage treatment in the capital region.

The commitment to begin sewage treatment goes back more than two decades, ditto the buck-passing intrigues that prompted columnist Jack Knox of the Victoria Times Colonist to dub the B.C. capital “dysfunction-by-the-sea.”

The go-ahead seemed imminent back in 2014. The project had a name — Seatterra — a \$300,000-a-year CEO and workers were clearing the chosen site at the entrance to Victoria harbour.

But the proposed treatment plant needed a larger footprint than strictly allowed under zoning by the host municipality of Esquimalt. Under pressure from residents, Esquimalt council declined to approve the variance, vetoing the project as it then stood. That, in turn, prompted the region to reconsider options, via a process that looked at other possible sites, Clover Point being one of them.

Having many times mocked Victoria for its ever-more creative stalling on the sewage treatment file, I passed on the invitation to join the neighbourhood not-in-my-backyard movement and my lawn was one of the few without a sign.

Then in late August Clover Point was dropped from the list of prospective sites over cost considerations — the plant would have been built underground — and its proximity to residences.

This month the short list was trimmed to a final recommendation: McLoughlin Point, which is no less picturesque than Clover Point in terms of view, but more remote from a residential neighbourhood and less challenging as a building site.

The former oil tank farm at the entrance to the harbour is also precisely the same place the region chose last time, which had the local business community quoting Yogi Berra: “It’s déjà vu all over again.”

But there was nothing funny about the return to McLoughlin Point for Esquimalt council, because this time the region had scaled the project down to fit the zoning, leaving the municipality no opening to bounce it a second time.

On Monday of this week, council met to discuss the fait accompli. I attended in the company of The Vancouver Sun's Victoria bureau chief, Rob Shaw. He lives in "E-town," as he calls it. Before joining The Sun, he spent several years chronicling the sewage saga for the Victoria Times Colonist.

Such was Shaw's command of the issue that his goingaway party at the Victoria paper was attended by none other than Mr. Floatie, the protester-cum-performance artist who shamed Victoria over the sewage issue by dressing up as a giant turd and handing out business cards printed on toilet paper.

Before council got underway in Esquimalt on Monday, I recalled how Shaw had predicted this outcome months ago. Every possible site in the capital region had already been studied and rejected for cost and other considerations. The trail would lead back to McLoughlin Point.

Not surprisingly, the mood in the council chamber was like the losing team's dressing room after the big game.

One councillor choked up when it came time to speak. Another fumed how he was "not going to hold hands with the region and sing Kumbaya."

An audience member said the region's decision to return to Esquimalt was "asinine," another that it made "a mockery of the public consultation process."

Mayor Barb Desjardins was branded a "sellout" for supporting the decision at the capital regional board the previous week. She said the vote was a "painful one" but reflective of a situation where the region had the financial equivalent of a gun to its head.

The federal and provincial governments threatened to withdraw their share of financing if the region did not get going by the end of this month.

Mindful of that time frame, the majority of members on the regional board concluded there was no choice but to proceed on the site in Esquimalt. "Whether I supported it or not, it would still be happening," said the mayor.

Major financial concerns remain and not just for her municipality. The reputed \$765-million budget for the revised project is nothing like a fixed cost, plans not having been finalized, tenders have not been called nor contracts awarded. Coun. Tim Morrison, of the aforementioned "Kumbaya" demurral, warned the project could turn into "the Johnston Street Bridge fiasco on steroids."

That's a reference to the wildly overbudget bridge being constructed at Victoria harbour, originally priced at \$63 million, lately at \$105 million.

Senior governments have already capped their contributions to the sewage treatment project, the feds at \$206 million, the province at \$248 million. So if it does end up costing more than expected, the region will be on the hook for the full amount.

Property taxes across the region are forecast to increase by \$150 to \$350 a year to cover the current cost estimate for sewage treatment. If the project goes overbudget — given all the fumbling to date, how could it not? — then on the taxation front at least, local ratepayers will find themselves sharing Esquimalt's pain.