

Sewage costs only half the equation

We don't know what benefits will accrue from the \$1.1-billion expenditure

BY DAVID ANDERSON

Some time ago the provincial government asked the Capital Regional District to prepare a plan for the treatment of Greater Victoria's liquid waste. The CRD presented a draft plan to the government earlier this year.

The cost of a treatment plan and associated systems was estimated at \$1.1 billion. There was no detailed analysis of the benefits that would result. We therefore have a cost estimate but not a cost/benefit analysis of the proposal, as the provincial government's own guidelines require.

A capital expenditure of \$1.1 billion translates to an annual increase in taxation for every core area residence of between \$500 and \$700 per year. While there has been optimistic talk of contributions from the provincial and federal governments to offset part of this, the likelihood of a public/private partnership makes substantial senior government contributions unlikely.

In any event, total costs are important. It is not reasonable to argue that taxpayers should consider only the taxes they pay to one of the three levels of government and ignore the other two.

Value for tax expenditures brings us back to the issue of benefits. Surely, given the size of the annual tax expenditure, it is up to the CRD and provincial government to show that the benefits of the proposed expenditure will be at least of equal value to the costs, and to show that alternatives have been explored.

Not all living in Greater Victoria are wealthy. Such an expenditure would make housing less affordable for seniors on fixed incomes, for young families and for the working poor. It would worsen the already serious low-income housing problem. If we are to further disadvantage the least financially able in our community, it is surely reasonable to ask for a detailed, careful and dispassionate analysis of what benefits there might be.

This responsibility must be taken seriously. For the past two decades citizens have been told by the CRD and provincial authorities that the current wastewater disposal system was effective, that the source control system was working to keep toxic substances out of the waste stream and that on-land treatment had higher costs (both economic and environmental) than were justified.

A year ago the CRD spent some \$600,000 for a Florida professional association to investigate the issue, and their report concluded that there was no compelling environmental reason to embark on major changes at this time.

Now the CRD and provincial government have changed their position. If they have different information to support this change, they should provide this to the public.

This is not a question of environment versus economics. Rather it is a straightforward question of good public administration and good public policy. Effective decision-making depends on adequate knowledge of costs and results. That knowledge should go beyond the dollars and cents issue. What is needed is analysis based on the triple bottom line of the economic, social and environmental issues involved. We can't get such analysis if we do not have the facts, and the facts are missing.

Public policy decisions frequently involve competing environmental priorities. Another CRD report of a few weeks ago concerned storm-drain runoff, rainwater that washes oil and other contaminants off the streets and gardens, into storm drains and then out to sea.

This problem would not be handled by the proposed \$1.1-billion expenditure. Yet in terms of negative environmental impact to our shores and marine environment, the contaminants in the runoff water from storm drains almost certainly has a greater negative environmental impact than those associated with the wastewater flowing through the current outfall system.

But how can the two problems and the costs of handling them be effectively compared if the CRD and provincial government fail to provide the information on which their decision to choose one and ignore the other was based?

Surface runoff is but one of the many local issues in the environmental field that require our consideration.

Effective decisions call for accurate and adequate information. On the Greater Victoria waste-water issue, so far the citizens of our community have had neither.

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