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## Civic leaders question sewage treatment costs

BY JEFF BELL *Times Colonist staff*

Many capital region residents continue to question plans for a sewage-treatment system that could cost in the range of \$1.2 billion, say members of a local citizens' group.

Former B.C. cabinet minister Mel Couvelier, real-estate agent Bob Wheaton and University of Victoria health economist Rebecca Warburton told the Times Colonist editorial board yesterday that a significant groundswell of dissent remains over the need to spend such a large amount of money on processing the region's sewage.

Environment Minister Barry Penner announced in late July that "the scales have now tipped" in favour of sewage treatment in the CRD, which is one of North America's few urban centres that dumps its sewage into the ocean. The federal government has indicated it will pay one-third of the cost of secondary sewage treatment, according to local politicians.

In September, John Baird — Penner's federal counterpart — said Ottawa has plans to spend billions of dollars over the next seven years in support of new national standards to prevent the dumping of raw sewage into the country's waterways.

Baird called Victoria's sewage situation "an important priority." At present, 129 million litres of waste pass through outfall screens each day before entering Juan de Fuca Strait.

Couvelier said he and others want to ensure that whatever is spent on sewage concerns is put to its best use.

"My sense of it is that the two senior governments are determined to put some money to this issue, and it's almost tilting at windmills to fight it. So the issue, in my mind, then becomes let's make damn sure the money is well spent."

Warburton said none of the planning to date looks at key issues such as toxic materials entering the sewage system or the need to fix the region's faulty storm drains. Couvelier said the existing storm drains were overburdened by last winter's rains, leading to 41 discharges of raw sewage onto local beaches.

"We're certainly not suggesting that nothing be done," said Wheaton. "We're not suggesting that what is being done is perfect. What we're suggesting is that there may be far less expensive alternatives to perfecting what we're doing, rather than going to this knee-jerk, landbased treatment system which will require huge capital, huge operating costs, huge expenditures of energy forever."

He said our natural systems — such as cold, fast-flowing ocean water — have a certain capacity to deal with sewage.

"We have this wonderful chemistry set out there called the Strait of Juan de Fuca."

Also part of the group questioning the direction of the sewage debate are several business and academic luminaries. Included among the signatories of a letter being circulated by the group are Dr. Shaun Peck, former deputy medical health officer for B.C., University of Victoria dean of science Tom Pedersen and a number of other UVic faculty members, Esquimalt-Juan de Fuca MP Keith Martin and engineer Ted Dew-Jones.