



Answers needed on \$1.2B sewage plan

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The undersigned citizens of Greater Victoria support the efforts of our local, provincial and federal governments to explore alternative methods of handling liquid waste disposal in our community. The region is growing and changing, and future needs must be considered.

We are however concerned that objective information is needed, and soon, balancing the costs and benefits of all currently available options.

We have been impressed by the detailed assessment by well-informed people - environmentalists, marine scientists, engineers, economists and health-care professionals - that has been assembled on the website www.rstv.ca.

The evidence indicates that the worst problem with the existing liquid-waste disposal system is the continued failure to address storm drain overflows. Last January, for example, heavy rains resulted in raw unscreened sewage being discharged from storm drain outfalls along the coastline more than 40 times.

The Ministry of Environment has mandated sewage treatment, at an estimated cost of \$1.1 billion. Yet the currently recommended plan submitted to the minister would not fix the storm drain problem. Nor would it enhance the already exemplary source control program (which stops many toxic chemicals from ever going down the drain).

The proposed treatment expenditure is huge: \$1.1 billion is equivalent to \$500 to \$700 per year, per average household, in the core area for the next 50 years. The cost is similar to the annual cost per Victoria household of the entire Victoria Police Department.

Evidence-based policy requires evidence. Open government requires that citizens be informed. With these requirements in mind, we assert that the Ministry of Environment has a duty to commission and publish an independent, objective, cost-benefit study of the proposed land-based treatment option.

Consistent with provincial and federal guidelines for cost-benefit analysis, such a study must examine all relevant alternatives, including the existing system "as is" (the status quo); the existing system with low-cost and probably highly cost-effective enhancements, related to storm drain discharges and source control; and the currently proposed plan.

Before proceeding with a \$1.1-billion expenditure, citizens of the Capital Regional District and interested observers elsewhere should be provided with evidence of the environmental or other benefits to be expected from the treatment plan proposed and the harms that may result (for instance from the disposal of large volumes of sludge that will be trucked through residential neighbourhoods).

At present, only hypothetical benefits have been identified for proposed land-based treatment. The costs are substantial. This is hardly good evidence for acceptable, rational public policy.

Before the CRD spends more of our local tax dollars on planning for land-based treatment, it is essential that the evidence be assembled on the costs and benefits of all viable alternatives.

We call on the Ministry of Environment to fund, commission and publish such a study, with no further delay.

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