

# Community interests come first

## Water problems in Central Saanich evoke sympathy, but is it justified?

By Dr. MICHAEL M'GONIGLE

The *Times Colonist's* April 20 article "Central Saanich families desperate for water" will have provoked much sympathetic reaction. As a local resident, I am familiar with the issue of water quality on Senanuss Drive — and with the unfounded claims of a few residents. My greater concern is for the future of our rural jewel, the Saanich Peninsula, which these residents heedlessly threaten.

Preserving our rural inheritance will require a level of sophistication about water planning that is not evident today. Senanuss Drive is a metaphor for our situation. In the I.C.'s story, it was reported that numerous families in the area were unable to bathe their babies because of unhealthy well water. In response, the local council was criticized for seemingly blocking the solution — a pipeline connected to the regional water supply — because it might lead to increased development.

But the facts are more complicated. For one thing, there is no demonstrated health problem on the road. An early study by the Capital Health Region (CHR) that pointed to a health problem was completely rejected by a later study (in which the CHR was also involved).

The problem was that the CHR had erroneously tested tap water, not well water. It turned out that the aquifer was healthy, but individual household systems were poorly maintained or faulty. Some esthetic problems (such as water hardness) exist for a few (seven) residences. The municipal council attempted to address these issues, in particular, by cre-

ating a "water advisory task force" of which I was the citizen chairman. That body spent the better part of two years reviewing available data, and considering a range of solutions.

Unfortunately, the Senanuss lobby actively opposed every initiative council took. For example, in their single-minded quest for a pipeline, they unilaterally wrote to Ottawa to oppose council's application for a federal grant to study small-scale alternatives. Council withdrew that application.

If we are to maintain our rural areas in the face of a concerted development agenda, how are we to do it?

First, it requires responsible citizens. Many people in the CRD live in rural areas — from Sooke to North Saanich — and they must accept the added challenges that this entails. The urbane who opts for the spacious country life should

not then complain about normal barnyard smells. Rural residents who draw from wells, and use septic systems, must be prepared to maintain them, and to deal with inevitable seasonal fluctuations in water levels.

In the Senanuss story, a woman is pictured bathing her child with bottled water. This is ludicrous. For under \$3,000, one can purchase two tanks (4,800 gallons) that can be filled for just over \$100. For the low-water summer months, this is one cost-effective solution that many in the area already use. And it doesn't require a million-dollar, taxpayer-subsidized pipeline.

Be assured: urban infrastructure leads to urban sprawl. The draft Regional Growth Strategy presently before the Capital Regional District proposes a "regional urban containment and servicing policy." In other words, urban con-

tainment means reduced services outside the boundary. This is exactly what Senanuss residents knowingly bought into. Their area has long been zoned rural/residential, a zoning that explicitly provides for reduced services.

"Build it and they will come" is a well-known phenomenon against which zoning regulations are too frail. In North Saanich, after regional water lines were installed, septic systems (now being flushed with chlorinated water) quickly failed.

Today, the issue of regional sewer lines is a hot political debate.

Second, where individual systems are inadequate, one should look next to localized, collective solutions, such as community cisterns. These are common throughout suburban and rural areas in Canada, and they work fine. But our entire planning framework is skewed

against new technologies and smaller scales.

The focus of the Senanuss issue should not just be on a few self-interested citizens using an individual (sovable) water problem to gain a personal benefit from a public investment, a benefit that undermines the larger community. Attention should also focus on those public institutions that allow this to happen, all the while blocking the innovation that might provide sustainable alternatives.

For example, as we face another water shortage this summer, Victoria continues to dump its sewage into the sea along with tens of millions of gallons of perfectly good, recyclable water. With available technology, much sewage water could be reclaimed for farmers who could, in turn, reduce the demands on the regional fresh water supply. But who gives such innovation a thought?

Rather than capitulating to a few insistent, development-minded residents, local politicians should force our provincial and regional agencies to innovate in the quest for cutting-edge alternatives.

Certainly, all citizens need clean water. But the infrastructure to provide it needs to be appropriate to many goals — conserving fresh water and reusing wastewater; protecting rural landscapes including farmland and the farm economy from urban sprawl and encouraging regional innovation for everyone's benefit.

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### COUNTERPOINT

## Denial of service as a weapon against development

Something about the April 20 article "Central Saanich families desperate for water" made me feel very uncomfortable.

In the 21st century, it seems archaic to deny a community clean, potable water in order to curb development. Surely this concern ought to be controlled with zoning bylaws?

Maybe the reason I'm overreacting to something that is happening far away

from my community is because there are some painful similarities in my community (probably played out in other rural areas also).

Here in East Sooke we have the Silver Spray development, which proposed a desperately needed water line, turned down at the CRD board. (Mayor Wayne Hunter of Central Saanich voted No).

All along I have suspected the reason for the controversy on Silver Spray

was primarily to deny water to our community and therefore prevent any further development.

If surely is a sad reflection on the times we live in, when those elected to serve our collective needs, those in power at the CRD, can use water, so necessary for sustaining life, as a weapon against development.

Merrell Hartlow,  
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