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Irene Booth shows the difference between a muddy-coloured towel washed with her well water and one washed in cleaner water elsewhere in Greater Victoria.

Christine van Reeuyk/Peninsula News Review

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## Bad water not a myth

By Christine van Reeuyk - Peninsula News Review

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While the District of Central Saanich is concerned with wording in the Regional Context Statement and Official Community Plan regarding water main extensions, Irene Booth is heating water on the wood stove to wash her face. Pumps don't work when the power is out, and Booth is one of many in her neighbourhood on well water.

Lori Waters of the Mount Newton Neighbourhood Association, which recently wrote letters contesting the validity of a provincial-federal grant approved for the proposed water main extension for Mount Newton X Road and Senanus Drive, asserts the lack of potable water is a myth; residents in the area vehemently disagree.

Booth is a 48-year Senanus Drive resident who doesn't drink the water that comes from her tap, or cook with it. For that she uses water from bottles, filled during her weekly Wednesday trip to her daughter's home in Colwood. Booth only uses the water from her well for bathing, laundry and toilets.

It is not a myth that the water in Senanus is bad, residents there say; it's fact. It's one reason Booth doesn't own white sheets, white clothing or white linen, she said. She held out two towels, one washed at her daughter's house the second one, mottled in brown, was washed at her own home.

"We do have a water problem," said Peter Berrang, who utilizes storage tanks replenished by trucked in water. "At the end of the day when you have no water that's what you do, you truck it."

"I manually haul drinking water from Thrifty's," said Michael Hiltz, gesturing to a large blue jug. His parents, who used to live in the home, distilled their own water.

The inheritance of homes brings forth a myth these residents would like to debunk — that they are all living in mansions with swimming pools.

"I could not afford to pay the taxes every year and stay here," Booth said, explaining she defers her property taxes each year. Denford, who bought his property on Senanus in 1968 and can list the names of his neighbours and the lineage of each home, says Booth is not alone in deferring, as the property assessments create a rise in their taxes.

They also take offense to the implication that enough environmental elements haven't been used.

"Every single alternative has been explored ... I've tried everything out there," Berrang said. "It's just not practical, it's not rational."

"We've been practicing conservation out of necessity for 25 years," Denford said.

In the summer the "corrosive" water isn't even available as many wells simply dry up, Denford said, and there is little rain to augment other water stores. The problems range from salt water intrusion, and "unacceptable levels" of lead, magnesium and other elements.

"It's just lousy water," Denford said. "It's untreatable and there's nothing to treat in the summer."

"I'm a tree hugger," Denford said, gesturing to row upon row of tiny Garry oak seedlings nestled near a greenhouse. "I use a lot of water but most of it is for the plants," he said. He also trucks his water in, held in massive storage tanks on his property.

Denford's son has returned to the area after leaving years ago when his then-babies were affected by bathing in the water, the proud grandfather explained.

"I lost the family to the water," Denford said. "They had to move into town."

His son recently bought a home on Senanus since water appeared to be on the way with a grant in place and a successful petition.

"There will always be dissension on these things, the charter recognizes that," Denford said. A petition requires 50 per cent plus one, criteria met by the most recent petition.

Earlier this year council passed a motion to have staff draft the necessary bylaw to move the project forward. After in-camera discussion, council rescinded that motion and made the move to amend the Regional Context Statement in the OCP to create consistency with the the CRD's Regional Growth Strategy. The Regional Context Statement in the Central Saanich Official Community Plan says the district does not extend urban services such as the sewer and water system into rural or agricultural lands. The CRD's Regional Growth Strategy outlines exceptions to address pressing public health or environmental issues or to provide water for agricultural or fire suppression uses.

The district's OCP created the residential settlement area and the 2003 RGS used that boundary as the urban containment and servicing area — Senanus is outside that area.

Denford feels that the change the municipality is currently seeking to the Regional Context Statement is not necessary to move forward with the proposed water main.

“[An OCP] is supposed to look at the general direction of the community,” said Denford, who has worked as a planner in Victoria and Saanich. Rather than treating the OCP as a guiding document, he said, they're giving it the weight of zoning regulations.

“What's the problem with water? This should not be a controversial issue,” Berrang said.

The latest controversy is over a grant Central Saanich received to help fund the proposed extension. Lori Waters, a member of the Mount Newton Neighbourhood Association, said a legal letter outlining what they see as inaccurate information in the application for the federal-provincial Municipal Rural Infrastructure Funding grant, was sent to the district and the provincial and federal granting agencies.


Denford has had his own legal opinion on the letter that questions the validity of the grant application. He calls that letter a “quasi-political lobbying document.”

“If they delay it much longer there will come a time when we'll have to put it in and we'll have to pay 100 per cent not just one third,” Denford said. “This whole thing has sort of poisoned the community.”

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