

Vote won't end battle over water

Homeowners facing hefty tax hike split over need for municipal line

BY RICHARD WATTS, TIMES COLONIST APRIL 6, 2009



Jack Mar, mayor of Central Saanich, on Senanus Drive near Mount Newton Cross Road: "Anybody should be entitled to potable water in the 21st century."

Photograph by: Bruce Statesbury, Times Colonist, Times Colonist

Owners of 64 homes in Central Saanich will likely pay about \$800 more in municipal taxes as early as next year for a controversial water line that many say they don't need, but others argue is long overdue.

Central Saanich councillors will vote today for the fourth and final time on a bylaw to form a "local service area" of the homes along Mount Newton Cross Road and Senanus Drive -- a legal move that will see municipal water piped to the area now served by wells. The cost of the project is estimated at \$1.69 million.

The vote is widely expected to pass, since previous readings have been approved by a 4-2 vote. But it likely won't be the end to what has become a decades-long battle, as those who oppose the water line are considering legal action.

There are several issues: whether existing well water is unfit for consumption, who will pay for the new line, and whether the line will encourage more development in the area.

Central Saanich Mayor Jack Mar said he has heard enough, arguing the issue comes down to one simple truth: "Anybody should be entitled to potable water in the 21st century."

"Sooner or later, you just have to take a stand," Mar said, although he admits it won't be the end of the issue.

"If we pass this, we'll get sued. If we don't pass it, we'll get sued anyway. So it's a no-win situation."

The problem began in the late 1980s, when wells serving some of the 22 homes along Senanus Drive started to turn brackish. Over subsequent years, some residents reported water from their wells became steadily more foul in taste, and during some months of the year would stop flowing altogether.

It reached the point where the Vancouver Island Health Authority declared the water no longer fit for domestic use, although it stops short of calling it a health hazard except for people on low-salt diets, since it contains high amounts of sodium.

Gary Gibson, health authority supervisor of environmental health, said it's a matter of what "fit for domestic use" means.

To be considered fit, domestic water must be drinkable, but the Senanus water isn't because it tastes awful.

It should not corrode pipes and plumbing, and must serve as an effective washing agent without staining clothes or porcelain or giving people rashes.

Some Senanus residents have reported skin rashes and needing to replace hot-water tanks as frequently as every two years.

Yet, if water fails these criteria, it doesn't mean the water should be counted as a "health hazard," he said.

Unwilling to make any firm judgment on whether a municipal water line is the best solution, Gibson said the move seems to him "the most logical."

However, not all the wells have poor water. In fact, many residents on Mount Newton Cross Road are satisfied with their water, and don't want to pay for a service they say they don't need.

Many already treat their water and have cisterns for low-flow periods.

According to provincial law, when residents are given access to a service like water, they should be charged.

So when the waterline is extended along the final, most western 1.75 kilometres of Mount Newton Cross Road, residents there must pay, whether they hook up to it or not.

Municipal officials say residents have two options: pay about \$810 a year, depending on interest rates, for about 15 years, starting when the project is completed, perhaps as early as 2010; or pay a one-time fee of \$8,530.

Either way, many aren't happy. "We have a very adequate well system and we have all the water we need," said Carole Carmack, a resident of Mount Newton Cross Road.

Opponents also resent that all homeowners will pay the same amount. They argue some of the homes on Senanus are bigger and more expensive than their more modest Mount Newton neighbours.

And they question the legal validity of the petition that in 2007 gathered the 51 per cent approval necessary for the municipality to act. It's said some signers now want to reverse their position.

There's also a backlash against the idea of a municipal line for fear it will bring more development to the neighbourhood. Some argue municipal water will make more houses possible in an area where new building was restricted by access to well water.

And finally, some residents also argue that municipal officials haven't spent enough time investigating alternate solutions or properly consulting other stakeholders, such as the nearby Tsartlip First Nation.

Many of the concerns are outlined on a website created by the Mount Newton Neighbourhood Association. The site, senanus.net, offers a vast array of documents, charts and maps -- a testament to just how complicated and controversial the issue has become.

Waterline opponents are asking for a third-party-mediated process to resolve the outstanding issues.

"There is just a whole bunch of things associated with this project that raise a red flag for me," said Rob Bocking, a fisheries biologist who lives on Mount Newton Cross Road and relies on well water, for which he installed a home treatment and filtration system. "I remain to be convinced there aren't less-expensive local solutions."

But Mike Baier, a 15-year resident of Senanus Drive with a long record in the construction business, said he has investigated home-based solutions and found they take too much power or require too much water to work properly.

Frank Towler, another Senanus Drive resident, noted that several months of the year his well runs dry "If you don't have any water there is nothing to treat."

One resident who has already spent thousands to solve the water problem is developer Gordon Denford. He recently offered to donate the services of his company to complete the water-line project.

Denford estimates he has spent about \$125,000 trying to cope with the well water. He said he has dug three new wells, two of which are now dry, re-plumbed his house after the water corroded the pipes, and replaced water pumps and nine hot water tanks in 10 years.

He gets upset when he discusses the opposition to the municipal water pipe. "Is this what a community is all about?"

rwatts@tc.canwest.com

© Copyright (c) The Victoria Times Colonist