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Estimates escalate for Victoria sewage plan, and it's early days yet

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VICTORIA - Environment Minister Barry Penner admits he was taken aback earlier this summer when he received the updated sewage treatment plan for the provincial capital region.

Penner had commissioned the update a year ago, when he announced that the Capital Regional District would have to end the practice of pumping untreated sewage through ocean outfalls.

He also committed the provincial government to sharing one-third of the cost of secondary treatment, along with the federal and regional governments.

When he made the announcement, Penner was proceeding from estimates provided by the regional authorities, suggesting the project would cost in the order of \$400 million to \$500 million.

But that costing was as raw and untreated as the sewage. In a report delivered to Penner at the end of June, the revised capital cost is said to be \$1.2 billion and, depending on the options, could readily be higher.

"I was disappointed," Penner told me this week, inadvertently capturing how many people were feeling about the week's news regarding his government's handling of the convention centre budget.

But the environment minister brushed aside any possibility that the rapidly escalating cost could provide an opening to postpone sewage treatment for another generation or two.

He's noted a rearguard action by some residents of the capital region: "There are still some people dug in, saying that the status quo is fine."

Penner says they are wasting their time: "It is a reality that sewage treatment is required here." Treatment is supported by science he says, noting that a ministry study found contaminants near the outfalls.

"They" -- meaning those opposed to secondary treatment -- "said it was fine. It was not fine. It failed our standards."

Treatment is also required by law. "Even oil and gas exploration camps that are temporary have to treat their sewage," the environment minister said. "Victoria has been granted an exemption for many years but Victoria's time is come. The decision is made."

Next step will see his ministry reviewing the plan from the Capital Regional District, shooting back some questions, trying to work out the answers.

He also thinks the cost estimate "needs to be tested some more," given the way it has more than doubled in a year.

The B.C. Liberals continue to hope that the cost can be reduced, through innovative

methods of treatment and some form of public-private partnership.

The regional district has commissioned a \$300,000 assessment of the prospects for private sector involvement in the project.

Other aspects of the project are far from decided. The current plan calls for treatment to be spread over five and possibly six sites in the region, each of which comes with its own menu of possible controversies.

And since one of those sites is not far from the end of my street, some of those controversies hit pretty close to home.

The regional district has shelled out almost \$500,000 for a consulting firm to try to sort out issues with each of the sites and recommend the final selections.

For now, the preferred location for the main primary and secondary treatment plant is on land owned by the department of national defence in Esquimalt.

The regional district has entered into talks about acquiring the seven-hectare site, and is also consulting a local native band that has its own interests in the land.

Decisions on sites and treatment methods will be delivered at the end of 2008, which by an amazing coincidence is a month after the next round of civic elections.

Then . . . well, the regional district has set a goal having secondary treatment up and running by Dec 31, 2016. And even that somewhat distant completion date is subject to "land acquisition and capital costs."

Penner mused during the interview whether "that's too long." I advised him that we take our own sweet time doing things here in the capital, and 9 1/2 years may turn out to be excessively ambitious.

He sighed. But however the details turn out, the province remains on the hook for its one-third share of the project, according to Penner.

The federal government recently reiterated its commitment to a third as well, though Ottawa would probably deduct the value of the defence department land from any cash contribution.

That would leave local ratepayers on the hook for the other third. "It is too early to speculate on the cost for an individual household," the regional district says, leaving that reckoning for another day.

But it could easily add \$500 a year to the average property tax bill.

Capital residents once rejected sewage treatment via referendum, but they aren't likely to get that chance again.

With the province insisting treatment is required by law, it is also looking at a way to impose the capital cost on the regional without a referendum.

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