

A flood of concerns over protecting water sources

A "little bit Draconian", a "boondoggle" (a waste of time or money on a pointless project) and more unnecessary government – Susan Self, a provincial clean water official, faced a flood of pull-no-punches criticism when she updated Town Council recently on development of Ontario's Drinking Water Source Protection Plan.

Post-Walkerton, in 2001 when seven died and 1,500 were made ill by drinking improperly treated tap water, contaminated with E. coli from a farm field runoff, source water protection became the focus at Queen's Park. A new Drinking Water Source Protection Act requires communities to work together to identify threats and policies and programs to reduce or eliminate the risk to protect existing and future groundwater drinking supplies.

Threats and vulnerable areas

Self, Chair of the Central Lake Ontario Source Protection Committee that includes Halton Hills, said it was "no surprise" an assessment report found the Acton and Georgetown wells are "quite vulnerable to con-

tamination" from threats.

"Right now, we're showing 2,308 significant drinking water threats in all wells," Self said, they are now developing policies to deal with vulnerable areas and threats from a list of 21 things known to affect drinking water quality and quantity, including the storage, handling and application of agricultural fertilizers, pesticides, and road salt, among other substances. She said water quantity stress has also been identified in Acton and Georgetown, and the approach is to identify if the threat is low, moderate or high and then deal with it, either by management or prohibition.

"Boondoggle" charge

Mayor Rick Bonnette, who said he didn't want to shoot the messenger, asked Self that if he were a large rural landowner, should he be concerned by the Source Water Protection plans. "What I'm seeing here is another layer of government, another level..." Bonnette said. Self said the operations of such a farm are probably already covered under the Nutrient Management Act, and they are looking at what to do with farms which produce less



CELTIC CONCERT: An appreciative crowd packed Trinity United Church on Friday for the Oakville and Georgetown Celtic Fiddle Clubs' performance of A Celtic Christmas. – Ted Tyler photo

than the threshold under the Act.

Bonnette said Halton was one of the first municipalities to develop an aquifer management plan in 1994. "I'm very concerned with where this is going...there will be financial impacts," he said, then asking Self, "Do you see this as a boondoggle?"

Self reminded him that the policies would affect only a very small portion of the land directly around the well, and said there are no figures available, but any impact would be reported before the Town's 2013 budget talks.

Cost questioned

Ward Two Councillor

Bryan Lewis was also concerned about the cost, eliciting from Self that the annual budget for the Source Water Protection committee and staff is \$1.5-million, and to date, the province has provided approximately \$120-million to municipalities across the province to learn "where municipal water comes from and what are the things that make it vulnerable to contamination."

Acton Councillor Mike O'Leary said he found the plan "a little bit Draconian," including the requirement for a risk management plan between a landowner and risk management of-

officials for which there is no appeal. "So, if you've got somebody running a feed lot, for instance up in Erin, that because of the way the land falls, most of the nitrates that are coming down are affecting the Acton wells... are you going to go up to Erin and tell somebody to close down a feed lot?" O'Leary asked. He was told if a risk management plan is required, the County of Wellington would manage drinking water threats affecting Acton's well, and would negotiate with the landowner and not use the Draconian tool of prohibition, although that tool does exist.

Acton wells

Acton's water system

includes five wells in three well fields including the Fourth Line well, two Davidson wells, and two wells at Prospect Park – all susceptible to the influence of surface water. Sodium and chloride levels are an issue at the older Prospect Park well, and there are concerns that nitrates are increasing at both Davidson wells and the Fourth Line well.

Town Council will ask the province to extend a deadline for pre-consultation on the draft Source Protection Plan policies to March 31 to give more time to review the proposed policies, and to extend the submission deadline from August, 2012, to a year from now



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