

Ten-year comedy of errors and red tape leaves Hornby residents high and dry

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Having to deal with the water issues in Hornby the last 10 years has been tiresome and difficult for us. I cannot imagine what it is like for the residents.

That's how Halton Hills councillor Clark Somerville describes the plight of a group of 16 homeowners in Hornby, Ont., who have been trying unsuccessfully to secure a public source of clean and reliable drinking water for the last decade.

The reason they haven't been able to? Government red tape.

Their decade-long saga began in March 2007, when Halton Region began construction of a sewage pumping and lift station nearby on Steeles Ave.

The station required construction of an approximately 80-foot deep sanitary sewer waste reservoir. During excavation, two of the main water aquifers feeding resident wells were compromised and began to affect area wells.

In order to complete construction Halton Region began pumping out the excavation using many pumps running 24/7. As a result, 68 wells (that we know of) began experiencing severe water shortages and other problems, said the Hornby Association of Rate Payers (HARP) in correspondence to members in 2014.

In response, Halton Region was forced to provide those residents with water through tanks re-filled twice per week for a year and a half.

At the time, residents were assured the aquifers would stabilize and their wells would begin functioning as normal again once the project was complete.

Despite assertions to the contrary by the region and town, for many that didn't happen.

According to HARP, as of 2014, 33 of the 68 wells originally affected in Hornby never fully recovered and some not at all.

They never did recover, said Kowal. About three or four years ago when (The IFP) published the region says all the wells have recovered, I got really upset and sent a letter to mayor (Rick Bonnette) and said 'This is B.S. (they) have not.'

Things got better, (most of our 16) wells did recover to a point, but they have never ever fully recovered. There's not one that I know of that has fully recovered, added Kowal.

Not only did many wells not recover, HARP says others experienced problems with silt and smelly, dirty water; high salinity or iron content and in some cases even high levels of e-coli bacteria.

For almost a year we were all on tanks and they all had to be filled twice a week. (The cost) was into the millions of dollars, said longtime resident and HARP spokesman Erik Kowal. Some people never really got their water back.

For eight years, there's been a lot of problems. My well has never recovered, a lot of the neighbours have never recovered. I've had to install since then an iron filter, I've had to install a silt filter. We've had more e-coli reports since then, added Kowal.

Once it became clear some of the damage was irreversible, the Halton Region reimbursed all 68 homeowners \$3,000. However, Kowal said in some cases residents were forced to spend thousands of dollars out of pocket to either dig new, deeper wells or have costly water collection systems installed to ensure a steady source.

James Snow, owner of one of the 16 homes still affected, said his well was one that never recovered at all and has been receiving weekly water deliveries from Halton Region for the last 10 years.

My well isn't just not working really well it's not working at all. It's packed full of silt. Mine is one of the worst ones, said Snow.

Despite all the issues, residents remained optimistic a resolution would be forthcoming as both regional and Halton Hills reps indicated the area would be re-zoned in the



A Halton Region-supplied water tank at Erik Kowal's brother's house just off Sixth Line in Hornby.

Photo By Graeme Frisque

near future for urban development, as part of the of the Premiere Gateway Phase 1B Integrated Employment Area between Eighth Line and Sixth Line.

We were advised that Halton Region would investigate further and we would meet again to discuss solutions. HARP has been in touch with the Region during this summer reminding them to not view our patience as complacency, wrote Snow on HARP's blog.

The re-zoning would have allowed the region to connect all affected residents to a public water source and Halton Hills was in the process of re-drawing zoning lines as part of its updated Preferred Land Use Concept.

That ultimately did not occur. Fast-forward to 2014 and that's where things really started going off the rails.

HARP began getting seriously involved in the re-zoning process as Halton Hills Preferred Land Use Concept for their area began to take shape.

At first, the block where Snow, Kowal and the other 14 residents reside was not included in the urban planning area due to a natural heritage designation. The reason? A foot-deep irrigation ditch Kowal dug years

ago to prevent pooling on his 25-acre property.

After what Kowal described as several visits from town staff, council and consultants, it was determined the ditch was not a natural water course and removed the natural heritage designation.

The small block bordering Sixth Line where these 16 homes are located was finally included in the plan and everything seemed to be heading toward a happy ending.

According to Kowal, no one was interested in living next to a future warehouse or mall and the 16 homeowners all agreed to package their lands together and offer the whole area to potential developers. Kowal produced a stack of information packages from various developers to illustrate the interest in the soon-to-be re-zoned lands.

All seemed well and finally approaching a resolution until earlier this year.

In January, residents attended a public meeting regarding Halton Hills new proposed Preferred Land Use Concept map. To the residents' surprise, their properties were no longer included in the plan.

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