

# Big Pipe only way to solve septic woes: provincial officials

BY LISA QUEEN  
Staff Writer

Ontario's chief medical officer of health and Health Minister Elizabeth Witmer both agree failing septic systems in King City are a health risk that can only be solved by connecting the community to the York-Durham sewage system.

"The York Region health services department has clear evidence that the failing private sewage disposal systems are, in fact, contaminating tributaries of the East Humber River, thereby posing a serious health hazard," Witmer wrote in a letter to then-environment minister Norm Sterling last year.

Dr. Colin D'Cunha, chief medical officer of health, and his staff in the public health branch agree that such a potential health hazard exists.

Witmer's letter, released Thursday by King Mayor Margaret Black, trumps a letter from a branch of the environment ministry disclosed last week by King City Councillor Jane Underhill.

Black and Underhill have been warring for years over whether King City should be hooked up to the York-Durham sewage system, known as the Big Pipe.

Backed by York Region medical officer of health, Dr. Helena Jaczek, Black insists the Big Pipe is the only way to solve the environmental and health dangers caused by malfunctioning septic.

But Underhill, who fears the pipe will open the door to massive development, believes a communal sewage plant would solve the problems.

Black says the province would never allow a sewage plant on the banks of a tributary to the Humber, adding council will prevent King City's population of 5,000 from growing to more than 12,000 over 25 years.

To back her position, Underhill trotted out a letter from the environment ministry's water and

sewage infrastructure section of the environmental partnerships branch which rejected the township's request for provincial funding for the Big Pipe connection.

"The projects have been evaluated by the project review committee and found to be ineligible for funding assistance, as you have not demonstrated a health or environmental problem as defined by the provincial water protection fund," said the letter written by director Daniel Cayen.

But the province mysteriously retracted the letter after it caused an uproar among King officials, replacing it with a more inoffensive version that merely said funding was denied.

The township demonstrated 17 per cent of all King City septic are failing, fewer than the required 20 per cent needed to qualify for provincial funding.

Underhill only managed to get her hands on a copy of the original letter after she filed a Freedom of Information request.

But Witmer's letter appears to take precedence over Cayen's.

"I am also informed that the only satisfactory solution to the problem is for the King City residences to be connected to the York-Durham sewage system," she said.

Witmer also refers to a letter from Jaczek which states, "It is totally unacceptable to me, as medical officer of health, that we have consistently high levels of fecal contamination in the tributaries of the East Humber River due to systemic failures of private sewage disposal systems in King City. This situation poses a health hazard and should be remedied as soon as it is feasible."

Witmer asked Sterling to reconsider giving the township funding, but the environment ministry maintained the community didn't reach the 20 per cent failure benchmark to qualify for a grant.

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