

Council kills Sauble sewer proposal

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by Rob Gowan

Questions remain over town's financial liability

A proposal to build a sewer system at Sauble Beach is dead.

In a unanimous decision Tuesday, South Bruce Peninsula council decided it will not continue with the project and will not move forward on an environmental study report recommendation.

But the question remains of how the town will pay for more than \$ 680,000 in unfinanced capital costs for the project. The town has also spent close to \$410,000 in provincial and federal funding on the proposed system.

Council is expected to discuss how to finance the more than \$1 million during budget deliberations. The town's next budget meeting is scheduled for Friday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the council chambers.

Coun. Janice Jackson was brought to tears Tuesday when council made the unanimous decision not to proceed on the project. Coun. Marilyn Bowman was absent from the meeting.

"It's hard to even really express how I feel right now," Jackson said outside the council chamber following the decision. "It's been a two-year battle for me. It has been many, many years for the people of my ward."

An environmental study report, completed for the last council in 2010, included a "preferred" option known as 5A that would see the town begin with a \$27.8 million sewer system that would serve 719 lots in Sauble Beach. The system would be expanded over three subsequent phases to eventually service 2,435 lots.

Jackson was clear during the election she was against the proposal. She finished first among those running in Ward 3, the Sauble Beach area, while Bowman, who was also against sewers, finished second in the ward.

"The election was really a referendum on the sewer system and then a vast majority of my ward were in such a situation that they would be losing their homes," said Jackson. "It was such an emotionally and financially crippling battle and I am so happy with the results of today's vote."

The 2010 option replaced a previous proposal that would serve just over 300 lots in the downtown core.

In 2009, the town signed an agreement with the federal government under the Building Canada Fund for a proposed sewage system at a cost of about \$ 10 million and received approval for provincial and federal grants totalling \$6.24 million.

But a new council, elected in late 2010, decided to revisit the issue and in late 2011 put any plans for sewers in Sauble Beach on hold until more information on the matter was gathered. An ad hoc committee was formed with the task of helping council determine if sewers are needed at Sauble.

But until the decision was made to put the project on hold, claims were submitted and grant funding in the neighbourhood of \$ 410,000 was received by the town. It is likely that money will

have to be paid back to the federal and provincial governments. The town also has unfinanced capital costs of almost \$690,000.

"There are financial implications which are tragic, but my way of thinking is that the people of Sauble Beach didn't ask for this, they didn't want it and it was never proven it was needed," said Jackson. "Whether this happened to the people of Sauble Beach or Wiarton or Hepworth or Red Bay . . . they just can't be held responsible for paying this bill that they didn't asked for solely. I think it has to be shared among the municipality and it is really unfortunate and it is very, very sad."

Last month council was presented with a pollution study of wells and beach drains carried out at Sauble Beach in August and September. Of the 100 wells sampled, E. coli bacteria was detected in two "at a very low level." Caffeine, which indicates the presence of dissolved sewage-related compounds, was detected in one well.

"I had no doubt that the results of the test were coming back the way that they were," said Jackson. "There has never been any evidence that we had widespread contamination of our wells and I just think for the council to have the courage to go ahead and approve the testing of those wells and then base their decision on the recommendations of the sewer ad hoc committee was commendable."

Coun. Jay Kirkland said at the time the report was presented in mid-January that it provided him enough evidence to show sewers were not needed at Sauble, something he repeated Tuesday.

The study also found that shallow groundwater in the beach drains contained measurable amounts of caffeine, but no E. coli bacteria, while surface water in the drains contained both caffeine and E. coli.

The ad hoc committee made six recommendations to council based on the pollution study. The town has already moved on the recommendations, including that South Bruce Peninsula continue on with a septic re-inspection program, begin a septic system and water treatment education program, continue sampling of the beach drains, work with the health unit and approach the Saugeen First Nation about water testing and monitoring.