

# Sauble sewers decision shows need for sensible municipal restructuring

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by Phil McNichol

Ah, there's nothing I like better than yet another example of the crying need - indeed the urgent need - for sensible municipal restructuring in the Grey-Bruce area. I suppose I may ride that particular hobby horse into the sunset.

Or, I could put it this way - this column and I will be longgone, distant memories before Sauble Beach gets the sewage system it and the regional economy has so obviously needed for a very long time.

But it ain't gonna happen until the Grey-Bruce area starts thinking on a regional level and puts that thinking into a form of municipal government that reflects socio-economic realities vital to the region.

I can easily understand how Sauble Beach residents in the area of the proposed, but now apparently defunct, \$27.8 million project weren't happy about it. Even with senior government grant help, hook-up costs for some people would have been a financial hardship. Meanwhile, the latest survey of well water quality found little evidence of problems. That likely made the difference in South Bruce Peninsula council's unanimous decision this week to kill the project, though that decision leaves the municipality with a \$1 million debt it has to find a way to pay off.

But there's two big points to make here:

First, Sauble Beach is one of the largest urban areas in GreyBruce, as big or bigger than most towns in the area; it's certainly spread over the largest area.

At certain times of the year, from May to September, Sauble Beach has by far the largest population of any community in Grey-Bruce taking into consideration year-round residents, cottagers and tourists. In this day and age no urban community of its size - a virtual city - should still be operating on the basis of private septic systems. It should have a municipal sewage system to collect and treat waste water to make it as harmless to the natural environment as possible.

Any other town or city of its size would have one by now. But Sauble Beach doesn't and so it remains vulnerable to pollution, especially when the population swells in the summer and/or when there's a heavy rain. The posting for a few days last June, and in June of 2010, warning that the water at the beach was unsafe for swimming, should have been a wake-up call. It sent shock waves through the commercial community at the beach and made headlines well beyond Grey-Bruce. But how quickly we forget.

Andrew Barton, safe water manager for the Grey Bruce Health Unit, told me "we really don't know exactly" what has caused elevated levels of E. coli bacteria in the waters at the beach in the past few years.

It has to come from fecal contamination originating with warm blooded animals, either domestic farm animals, wild animals, including waterfowl, or humans. The nearby Sauble River could be a conduit for agricultural pollution, but samples taken from it have not shown high levels of E. coli, Barton said.

The high bacteria levels in June seem to have been associated with storm events in that month; but there have been other heavy rain days in the summer that have not had a similar result. So, "it remains a bit of a mystery."

But if the problem is a human one, it's "probably" related to the use of private septic systems at the beach, Barton said. Go figure. What happens on May 24? A huge influx of people opening up their cottages, and campers filling the many campgrounds in the Sauble area to overflowing, that's what. Where's the mystery when common sense should point in that obvious direction?

My second big point is Sauble Beach is too important to the economy of the Grey-Bruce area to leave the question of a sewage system, or not, up to the Town of South Bruce Peninsula council. Many of those thousands of tourists and cottagers drive through Grey, Owen Sound and other parts of Bruce County to reach the beach.

They stop to eat and shop and maybe do some sight-seeing along the way. First-time visitors from the Greater Toronto Area and other major urban areas in southern Ontario and beyond are bound to be impressed by the natural beauty and pleasant small town ambience of GreyBruce and Owen Sound. They discover and then they come back to explore. Meanwhile, Sauble Beach is never going to be developed to its full potential as a quality resort destination without municipal sewer and water services.

Unfortunately, the current municipal structure of GreyBruce is not geared to make sensible decisions on the basis of that sort of vitally important socio-economic reality. It's not as bad as it was before restructuring, first in Bruce and then in Grey, in the 1990s. But it remains out of date, barely in the 20th century let alone the 21st, and parochial.

In this age of reduced senior government grants, municipalities should be big enough and financially viable enough to provide essential infrastructure, which is what a sewage system for Sauble Beach should be considered; and a water system too, for that matter.

I've been a journalist in this area for a long time. And I can tell you that as far back as the mid-1980s there was talk about the need for a sewage system in Sauble Beach. Back then there were 85% grants for such environmental projects. Municipal and provincial officials of the day should have had the vision and the sense to make it happen, but they didn't.

Sauble Beach was never an incorporated municipality as a village or town in its own right. It was part of the former Amabel Township. I remember the need, or not, for municipal services at Sauble Beach being discussed by members of Amabel council many times. They went to Toronto to lobby provincial officials for a grant, or so we understood. The official explanation for not getting one was the beach never quite made it to the provincial priority list for an environmental grant. But even then not everyone in the fastgrowing year-round community of Sauble Beach agreed there was a need. Perhaps that had an impact on the intensity of the pressure put on the province.

The economy of the Saugeen First Nation, where the aboriginal other half of Sauble Beach is located, also has a huge economic stake in its future.

What are the chances Saugeen, South Bruce Peninsula, the wider Grey-Bruce community and the provincial and federal government can put their heads and their resources together to do the right thing? Not great, I would say.

Municipal restructuring to create one-tiered municipal government for all Grey-Bruce is the only hope. Ideally that should include a partnership with the Saugeen Ojibway to finance and build municipal sewer and water services in the Sauble Beach area.