No quick or cheap fix for sewage troubles

par Richard Mahoney

Facing legal action, the town of Hawkesbury is scrambling to remedy its sewage treatment problems, which have lingered, and have been improperly monitored, for several years.

The Ontario Ministry of the Environment has charged the town because it has failed to ensure the Main Street facility meets provincial regulations. A trial is set for November.

Since early 2005, the treatment system has not complied with Ontario standards.

And the extent of the trouble has not been properly gauged because between 1998 and 2005, flows were understated, perhaps by as much as 30 per cent, since a flow meter was malfunctioning during that period.

Plus, while the plant produces about 14,000 cubic metres of sludge annually, the Ontario Clean Water Agency, which runs the plant, disposes of about 6,000 cubic metres, mostly by spreading it on farmland. The other 8,000 cubic metres of waste go into the nearby Ottawa River.

“You have a lot of solids going into the river that should be spread on land,” said Mike Eamon, vice-president and senior engineer with the Thompson Rosemont Group.

“It’s cheaper,” said the town’s interim technical services director Richard Guertin.

However, there was little levity during last week’s town council meeting when the grim scenario was presented by Eamon and Bill Knight, also a vice-president and senior engineer with the Cornwall-based TRG, which has been hired by the town to draw up short-term and long-term action plans.

“The plant can’t treat what is going in there,” Eamon cautioned, relating that a new facility could cost anywhere from $35 million to $40 million.

“The design of the plant does not meet today’s requirements, there is inadequate sludge storage and the plant has not been operated as well as it could be,” said Eamon.

The municipality will spend $75,000 to $100,000 to prepare a mandatory environmental assessment report that will be part of its application for government funding.

“It is an investment in our town,” observed Mayor Jeanne Charlebois. “This is our priority; we have no other choice.”

Eamon noted that, considering the town’s predicament, “You have an extremely strong application. You have been charged by the ministry and the situation is not getting better.”

Under standard cost-sharing deals with the Ontario and federal governments, the town would have to foot one-third of the solution. In rare cases, municipalities have been awarded funds to cover 90 per cent of project costs, added Eamon.

The town will look at two options: a new wastewater treatment plant on the existing site and a major upgrade of the current facility. “Some of that infrastructure can be reused. Ideally, you could get the cost down to $30 million or less by using the existing plant,” said Knight. “The equipment is still 30 years old,” Charlebois allowed.

Built in 1978, the plant was owned and operated by the Ontario government until the province transferred the facility to the municipality in 1994.

Marc Labrosse, the lawyer who is defending the town in the case brought by the ministry, observed that the exceedences of MOE guidelines were likely occurring prior to the transfer of the plant to the town. “When MOE owned the plant, the same thing happened,” said Labrosse. “Yes, but not as frequently,” replied Eamon.

Flow has been “trending upwards” since 1979, the firm related in a report to council.

In 2005, the firm of J.L. Richards & Associates recommended improvements be carried out. In hindsight, it was just as well that the recommendations were not fully implemented since the suggestions were based on inaccurate information, said Eamon. Some of the records on the operation will never be found. Years ago, “We had a break and enter and some of that data was lost,” said Harold Wilkinson, Assistant Operations Manager with OCWA.