Water meters in Hawkesbury inevitable, council told

par Richard Mahoney

Ten years after Hawkesbury citizens rejected water meters, the installation of the controversial devices seems to have become inevitable.

In a 1997 plebiscite, residents voted overwhelmingly against ditching the flat rate system in favour of meters that would introduce billing based on actual consumption of water.

But Glengarry-Prescott-Russell M.P.P. Jean-Marc Lalonde and Hawkesbury Mayor Jeanne Charlebois agree that water meters and other conservation measures are essential to prolonging the life of the town’s precarious sewage treatment plant, which is operating at near capacity.

Meters may be unpopular, but they are effective, Lalonde told council members at a special meeting Thursday. “The more water that is being used, the more that is going into your treatment plant and the more capacity is being used up,” said Lalonde.

“If we put in meters, we could gain 25 per cent in our capacity at the sewage plant,” said Charlebois, adding that people should be billed for water the same way they are billed for electricity and natural gas. “You want water, you pay for it,” said Charlebois.

Councillor Gilles Tessier observed that the flat annual rates residents pay are not equitable. “It is unfair for a person who saves water to pay the same bill as the person who water the lawn, the driveway and even the street every day of the week.”

Council has explored the possibility of having meters installed only in new developments. However, council members concede that eventually Hawkesbury must emulate communities such as L’Orignal and Vankleek Hill and install meters in all homes and businesses. There is no incentive to conserve water when everyone pays the same rates, Tessier pointed out.

“We don’t have any choice but to go ahead with meters,” Charlebois reiterated, noting that any government support would be conditional on meters being installed. She said that a decision on meters would be taken by the end of the year.

“We cannot impose meters on the people right away,” commented Councillor Gilles Roch Greffe. “We have to educate our population. Water is like hydro power. We all have a responsibility to conserve water like we have to conserve electricity,” he said.

Lalonde and Charlebois stressed that if the issue is not addressed, the town will pay for its inaction in economic terms. Some municipalities have had new construction frozen because its sewage systems were inadequate, Lalonde recalled. The arrival of new industries could also be hampered by the town’s obsolete sewage plant, added Charlebois.

Taxes, fees

Lalonde reminded council that Hawkesbury has a disadvantage in that it has the highest property taxes in Prescott-Russell. The town could reduce its overall tax rate by generating new revenues, he noted.

The M.P.P. suggested that the introduction of development fees would counter some of the extra costs created by new development. New homes generate taxes but they also increase demand for new municipal services, said Lalonde. Charlebois said that development fees were among the items council has been considering.

The M.P.P. related that, on a per capita basis, Hawkesbury’s police bill is similar to that of Montréal. The bill for the Ontario Provincial Police service contract works out to $380 per person, or $600 per family. “That is very, very high,” commented Lalonde. The big factor is that the town receives lower subsidies for police services than other area municipalities because it has a service contract with the O.P.P., since it absorbed the town police force in 1999.