EDITORIAL/OPINION

The first thing to fix in Hawkesbury

In February of this year, this newspaper reported that the Town of Hawkesbury was seeking government funding to complete a $12 million upgrade of its sewage treatment plant.

The first phase, which had cost about $6 million, was financed under the Ontario Small Town and Rural Development (OSTAR) fund.

That second stage was abandoned in 2005 when the town concluded it could not afford to complete the job. The second phase of work was to enable the town to satisfy its sludge storage capacity, which was at 90 days and should have been 240 days’ worth of sludge storage capacity.

In September, we reported that Hawkesbury’s waste water discharged into the Ottawa River has been non-compliant for most of the summer. Sewage bypasses occurred on June 27, 28 and August 6, due to wet weather.

The town has been unsuccessful in its bids for funding to repair and upgrade its waste water treatment facility.

Over the past decade or more, we have reported on the deplorable state of Hawkesbury’s waste water treatment plant, and other outdated plants in the region which were unable to keep up with treatment demands.

An Environment Probe study posted online indicates that Hawkesbury’s waste water treatment plant was out of compliance in 1991.

Now, the town is facing a steep fine for its non-compliant sewage treatment facility. Ministry of Environment charges date back to May of this year. And here is still another big surprise: the current plant does not meet today’s requirements. The cost to make the facility compliant? In the tens of millions, of course – and that doesn’t include studies and environmental assessments.

Copies of a Thompson Rosemount Group presentation which contain pertinent information presented at a public council meeting are not available from the town, it seems. Nor are details of charges laid by the Ministry of Environment available online.

Beyond the appalling thought of a large fine to be levied against a municipality and ultimately, paid for by the citizens who trusted their municipality to manage processes within the law, one cannot help but go one step further and ask what lies ahead for Hawkesbury.

Citizens are saddled with a facility which does not meet current requirements. The municipal administration does not have the money to replace it, nor, does it necessarily have the expertise to manage itself out of this dead-end situation.

We began by outlining just a few of the town’s waste water problems we have reported on previously. Maybe now, with the financial pressure looming, this can truthfully be called a turning-point and crisis for Hawkesbury.

More’s the pity that clear information, reports and problem-solving scenarios are not available in a timely manner from either the town or the Ministry of Environment.

We place the safety of our drinking water and our environment in the hands of our local elected officials, for the most part. In turn, the facilities they run are monitored by the province, which sets the guidelines to be met.

To add insult to injury, most of the documents and reports explaining this intricate relationship and the related costs, are not easily available to the public from any source, if they are available at all.

There are many problems that need solving at the municipal level. Whether or not there is provincial intervention involved, the public has the right to the same information as those making the decisions.

Hawkesbury’s leaders must move fast to set a fresh stage for sharing and organizing information. The sharing of information is the easiest problem to fix in Hawkesbury. Like the advertising slogan says: just do it.

L.S.