

# From the desk of the Mayor

## Water, Water, Everywhere?

▼ COMMENTARY

**MAYOR KEITH FIELDING**

One of the recurring worries shared by all municipalities in the Okanagan is that at a time when climate change threatens our supply of water, population growth is increasing our demand for this diminishing resource. The obvious question is: how much growth can the Okanagan actually sustain?

To address this question the Okanagan Basin Water Board (a water governance body funded by Okanagan Regional Districts) has partnered with the Ministry of the Environment and others to undertake the most extensive water study ever conducted in the Okanagan. The much anticipated report will be available in December of this year.

The report will address climate change, groundwater mapping, stream flows, reservoir lakes, population growth, fish habitat needs, and agricultural water demand. It will provide the public, policy makers, planners, and other decision makers with the information and tools they need to understand fundamental questions about water supply in the Okanagan. However, as this study seeks to answer valley-wide questions, there will still be much to learn about water supply and

demand in our local area.

Critical to understanding our local context are the various assumptions we make about the future. For example, while Peachland residents may have taken comfort from past studies which have projected that we have sufficient water supply to meet demand for the next 20+ years, we need to be satisfied that the underlying assumptions that informed past projections are valid today. Clearly some are not: for that reason the municipality (assisted by funding from developers) will be updating research into Peachland's water availability and revisiting the assumptions on which past studies have been based.

The conclusion that Peachland has sufficient water to meet projected demand is based on three important assumptions: that Peachland will grow at a rate of 60% over the next 20-years; that we will save 25% of water used per household as the result of water conservation measures; and that water demand for vineyards and agriculture purposes will not increase. In each of these cases, new factors have come into play that bring these assumptions into question.

The Pincushion Ridge development alone provides for a 100% increase in

growth over the projected 20-year horizon. We know that this development and the associated Championship Golf Course will not be the only development taking place in that period - many others are and will be 'on the books'. Based on today's information, it is clearly unwise to project only a 60% growth rate.

Consider the assumption that we can achieve a 25% reduction in water use per household through conservation measures. This goal that may well be an achievable with through community enthusiasm and tax incentives. However, if the reality turns out to be what many other communities have found - that we achieve only a 15% or 20% reduction, the projection is called into question.

With respect to vineyard and agricultural demand for water remaining flat over time, we know that vineyards are an increasingly important feature of the Okanagan economy. Because this is an industry

where water consumption is intensive, it is important to analyze the implication of growth in this sector.

Finally, there are two environmental issues that indicate the need to revisit our assumptions. The first is that our supply projections must take into account the impact of the Pine Beetle. Dead trees and deforested areas are a concern because they increase erosion, storm water run-off and divert water to ground supply where recovery may be difficult or impossible. These effects need to be understood and built into our projections.

The second environmental issue is that of climate change. We need to factor in the latest information available from scientists to update our understanding of what precipitation and snowpack changes we can expect and adjust our local projections accordingly.

None of the foregoing is to suggest that we have been misled or are mistaken in our belief that our watershed can sustain the kind of growth demands we are

experiencing. Nor is it to say that we should plan to allow the maximum development that our supply of water can

sustain. Rather, it is to point out the importance of an up to date and accurate review of our water capacity.



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