

AREA A RESIDENTS QUESTION DETAILS OF SEWER PROJECT AS CONSTRUCTION WORK FINALLY BEGINS

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Construction work began on the first phase of the Northwest Sector Sewer Project near the intersection of 104th Avenue and 81st Street on the morning of March 22. Although the effort to extend the Town of Osoyoos's sewer system to roughly 130 homes on or near Osoyoos Lake's northwest shore is underway, some residents feel certain aspects of the project don't add up. Photo by Paul Everest - Click on picture for larger image

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By Paul Everest - Osoyoos Times

After more than two decades of planning and waiting, construction work on the **Northwest Sector Sewer Project** finally began on the morning of March 22.

And while workers and heavy equipment were busy moving earth near the intersection of 104th Avenue and 81st Street, some residents in the area where the first phase of the sewer line will be installed were considering whether they would actually hook up to the project or not.

The residents of 15 properties along 87th Street were given the option last week to decline the opportunity to connect to the Town of Osoyoos's sewer system.

In a letter from the Town addressed March 16, the Town and the Regional District Okanagan-Similkameen (RDOS) state they will "consider formal applications from each property owner

fronting 87th Street to opt out (be excluded) from the Northwest Sector Sewer area.” The Town will be accepting applications to opt out of the project until March 31, the letter states. The letter also contained an advisory that anyone who chooses to opt out now may not be able to change their minds and hook up at a later date.

Choosing to hook up to the system in the future will mean a cost of “no less than \$23,790” as well as approval from Osoyoos town council and the RDOS board of directors and sewer servicing bylaws from both governments “to include your property,” the letter states.

Currently, the roughly 130 property owners in the area to be serviced by the project are being told the cost for hooking up to the system is about \$8,000 plus a \$115 sewer inspection fee and annual user fees of \$302.

According to the letter, “the only reason to allow an option to opt out of the Northwest Sector Sewer area is because your property is outside the environmental control zone established in the early 1990s by the Ministry of Health for septic tank systems.”

One resident who lives in the area where the first phase of the project is being constructed and is questioning many aspects of the sewer system extension said the March 31 deadline is unacceptable.

Rick D, who lives on 87th Street and asked not to have his last name used due to privacy concerns for his family, has asked officials with the Town, the RDOS and the Town’s engineering consultants, TRUE Consulting, why several properties on 87th Street were slated for inclusion in the project in the first place.

He said the properties are not near the lakeshore and therefore pose less of a pollution risk to Osoyoos Lake from leaking septic fields than properties on the water.

Resident wants opt-out deadline extended

In a response to the Town dated March 19, Rick stated that the March 31 timeline “not only puts unnecessary pressure on those of us who were home to receive the registered letter but as you can well appreciate might not even reach several of our neighbours who are away.”

He added that the Town should extend the deadline to give the property owners in question “sufficient time to receive and process the answers to several questions.

Connection costs for residents questioned

Rick, along with Mike Mortimer, an 81st Street resident whose property will also be hooked up to the Town’s sewer line during the project’s first phase, have been seeking answers from the Town, the RDOS and the engineers about several issues relating to the project.

For one, they want to know why rural Area A residents that will be serviced by the project have to pay anything at all.

The project is [estimated to cost \\$6.4 million](#).

But contributions from the developers of the Willow Beach and Reflection Point properties totalling nearly \$1.4 million, plus an infrastructure grant from the provincial and federal governments of which roughly \$4.3 million will be used for the project as well as a [pledge from the Okanagan Basin Water Board](#) of \$80,981 per year for 20 years have all been committed to paying for the project.

Since the sum of those contributions is roughly \$7 million, Rick and Mortimer ask why residents are being asked to pay \$8,000 a property.

Even taking into account problems that arise over the course of constructing the project, they argue, the contributions outmatch the estimated cost of the project by roughly half-a-million dollars.

Last month, the RDOS approved a [bylaw](#) enabling it to borrow more than \$1.2 million to service the debt created by the project which area residents will have to pay back.

Rick and Mortimer also want to know why the engineers have agreed to build access roads across a large property in the Phase 1 area owned by the Demelo family.

Rick said he believes the Town and the engineers have agreed to provide the roads, and run the main sewer line through the property, to accommodate a future subdivision on the property.

The Town and engineers from TRUE Consulting have said the project was not designed to accommodate any future development in the northwest shore area.

Another concern brought up by Rick and Mortimer has to do with “latecomers” to the project.

While the project is intended to service 130 lots in rural Area A, 40 lots on the Willow Beach property and 22 lots on the Reflection Point property, 28 lots will be left for future connections.

Rick and Mortimer want to know if the money paid by property owners who join up to these 28 connections down the road will go towards reducing the costs of residents who are hooking up to the project now.

Rick said he believes the Town will keep any money paid towards the project by latecomers down the road, even though he feels such cash should be used to reduce the financial burden placed on property owners hooking up to the system now.

The *Osoyoos Times* posed some of these questions to the Town of Osoyoos, but was told by Barry Romanko, the Town’s chief administrative officer, that such inquiries “will be dealt with on our priority basis and not on the priority to meet your press deadlines.”

“We are providing a newsletter to the area on the project next week and we feel that this is sufficient information at this time,” Romanko wrote in an email. “We may be able to respond to questions later in the week depending on our workload. All inquiries for information must come to me and not to contracted engineers or other staff.”

Engineer says moving fill to orchard cheaper than hauling it away

However, Terry Underwood of TRUE Consulting, did talk to the *Times* about the access roads on the Demelo property.

He said the Demelo family agreed to provide a right-of-way across their property for free.

Dirt excavated from the area to accommodate laying the sewer pipe would have to be trucked away anyway, Underwood added, and so moving it to the nearby Demelo property will actually be a cost-saving measure and will not add to the price tag of the project for taxpayers.

Underwood said crews working on the project will compact the dirt into roads for future development on the property.

Mark Pendergraft, director for rural Area A, said the 15 properties on 87th Street were included in the project because it a “cluster of development” near the lake and that increases the likelihood of potential pollution from septic fields reaching the water.

While some argue the leakage of pollutants from septic fields in that area is negligible, Pendergraft said when you add roughly a dozen homes together, that negligible amount of pollution increases.

He also said that having some of those properties opt out of the sewer project shouldn’t affect what other residents in the area pay for connecting to the sewer line.

If anything, Pendergraft said, costs could go down since fewer properties would need to be serviced.

Ultimately, Rick and Mortimer said they are looking for some accountability from the Town and they want the RDOS to do a better job of looking after their interests.

They added that they have met with lawyers and a legal challenge against the Town and the RDOS is possible.

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