

THE OKANAGAN SATURDAY, JUNE 13, 2009

WATER MANAGEMENT

Local knowledge is essential

Over the past few weeks, you have published an interesting series of articles and letters on water management in the City of Kelowna.

I am troubled by the fact that none of the contributors so far has mentioned the issue of sustainable watershed management.

Providing households with clean, safe drinking water is not just about the cost of reservoirs, pipes and treatment facilities. It is also about how we manage water at its source, how we care for riparian habitat and how we move water from natural to human settings and back again without destroying the ecosystems on which we all depend.

Over the past four years, I have been studying the history of water management in the Okanagan Valley.

Like Ron Seymour in his May 4 editorial, I began by thinking that the "patchwork" of water utilities in Kelowna was an indication of inefficiency and that a "strong central authority" would be preferable. I remember, with some embarrassment, my past references to this issue as the problem of "institutional fragmentation."

As it turns out, the institutions that manage water in Kelowna have been effectively co-ordinating their activities for a number of years now, largely as a result of the creation of the Kelowna Joint Water Committee.

The Okanagan Basin Water Board provides an-

other excellent example of how water management practices can be improved basin-wide, not through the unilateral decisions of a central authority, but through the co-operation of water management institutions at all levels of the governance system, from local utilities to provincial and federal ministries.

My research indicates that provincial government ministries are the worst offenders when it comes to making unilateral rather than co-operative water management decisions.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Lands last year attempted to implement a decision that was resisted by virtually every local level government in the region.

Its decision to sell off Crown lease lots on the foreshores of upland water reservoirs would have caused enormous problems for those seeking to improve source water protection practices.

Even more problematic is the unilateral decision of the B.C. Ministry of Community Development to not fund water infrastructure costs for improvement districts.

According to policy developed decades ago, only municipalities and regional districts are eligible for this funding. Improvement districts remain ineligible even when they service a larger population than some municipalities.

This is the real "elephant in the room" in this debate. Why is this policy still in place? I believe

it needs a full re-examination.

We should also consider the full range of benefits provided by improvement districts when analyzing the possible benefits of amalgamation.

Many improvement districts get their water from a single watershed.

The South East Kelowna Irrigation District, for instance, draws most of its water from Hydraulic Creek and its tributaries. They have an elected board of trustees who live in the watershed and staff members who regularly inspect the system.

This kind of "local" knowledge is essential to good governance of any physical resource.

Also, as others have pointed out, irrigation districts provide an essential "voice" for farmers within the governance system.

I would like to encourage our elected officials and water managers to draw up the terms of reference for any future governance study from a watershed management perspective.

The study should also include a careful examination of the provincial government policies that are mainly responsible for our current impasse.

Much more is at stake here than the simple delivery of safe drinking water to our homes and workplaces.

*John Wagner,
assistant professor
environmental anthropology,
UBC Okanagan*