



Rose Valley reservoir—Image credit: Flickr

# West Kelowna begins harmonization of water rates

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*By Mike Straus*

West Kelowna water users can expect to see rate increases this year as the City of West Kelowna prepares to fund significant upgrades and improvements to bring the municipal water systems into compliance with government regulations.

These improvements are part of the city's Water Master Plan, which calls for system-wide improvements to harmonize the water quality in all five of the municipal systems by 2021.



City of West Kelowna communications supervisor Kirsten Jones says that currently only one of West Kelowna's five water systems has a treatment plant—the Westbank system—and that only the Westbank system's water meets government requirements.

“The other four systems aren't treating the water in a way that satisfies the provincial and federal regulations. That's not atypical of municipalities of our size. But we were fortunate enough to receive a \$41 million grant last year to put toward a new water treatment plant, and we're absolutely thrilled.”

Jones says that there are still several construction-related projects that the municipality will have to pay for in order to proceed with the water treatment plant, hence why water rates will still rise despite the grant.

The new Rose Valley plant will cost \$49 million, she says, plus there will be an additional \$17 million project to construct necessary system connections in and out of the plant. The Powers Creek water treatment plant is also in need of upgrades to its storage facilities and fire protection

measures, which will cost \$7 million. Jones notes that aside from the government grants, additional funds will come from the city's own reserves.

“We're borrowing from ourselves to pay for the Rose Valley plant. Council considered borrowing the funds externally, but there was a risk that by doing so we could lose the grant, which is time-sensitive. Borrowing externally also requires a referendum, so there was a risk that we wouldn't be able to borrow. Council felt this was too important a project to miss out on, so we're borrowing from ourselves.”

Jones notes that the city intends to repay the funds borrowed from the reserve within seven years.

The city's water plan calls for the five separate water systems to eventually be integrated and harmonized, however, Jones says there's no immediate plan to connect the systems.

“The vision is that we'll have one water system, the West Kelowna Water System, with one quality of water. Both plants will produce the same quality of water for every resident, and everyone will pay the same rate.”

Jones cautions those concerned about the cost of water that it's not easy to compare water rates across municipalities given the inherent differences in the water treatment systems.

While the average annual residential water bill in the City of Kelowna is \$365 and the average Glenmore Ellison Irrigation District (GEID) bill is \$560 (based on residential property rates and the Okanagan Basin Water Board's estimate of residential water use), by 2021, West Kelowna residents will be paying \$907 annually, on average.

However, the GEID only last month ended a water quality advisory that began in 2006, while the City of Kelowna does not have a central treatment plant or a filtration system.

Says Jones: “It’s hard to compare water rates with other municipalities because of differing service levels. Only the Westbank System, Kamloops, Penticton, and Summerland have filtered systems – everyone else has some sort of chlorine or UV treatment. Water that’s only chlorinated doesn’t meet federal and provincial regulatory requirements, which is why we’re changing things.”

The city is expecting to break ground on the Rose Valley plant this year. It is expected to be modeled after the Powers Creek water plant, which currently meets all provincial and federal requirements for water quality.