

Editorial: New argument over sewage

Almost nothing to do with Greater Victoria's sewage-treatment project gets by without controversy. Some Capital Regional District directors think they have found a better way to deal with the project's sludge, but other directors say they are missing an opportunity to use new technology that would bring in revenue and save money.

The "preferred proponent" to build the \$765-million sewage-treatment facility has come up with an alternative for dealing with the sludge.

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Sludge, which also goes by the more appealing name of biosolids, is left over after sewage has been treated. After the sewage is treated at the McLoughlin Point plant, the sludge will be piped 18 kilometres to Hartland Landfill. What to do with it after that is a difficult problem.

At least initially, the sludge would be stored at Hartland.

The regional district's plan was to take care of the biosolids with another fancy term: integrated resource management. That means mixing biosolids with other things such as garbage and food scraps to produce something that would generate revenue, possibly by generating electricity.

The idea of seeing all waste products as a resource rather than just as garbage is sensible if we don't want to live in a world drowning in its own effluent.

The problem facing the IRM option is an odd one. It requires a steady supply of garbage, but the region's goal by 2050 is to redirect 95 per cent of our waste before it ever becomes garbage. Rethink, reduce, recycle and recover are the watchwords.

Without that reliable supply, IRM doesn't make financial sense.

What does make sense, according to the company bidding on the project, is to dry the biosolids into something that can be used as fuel in facilities such as cement kilns.

That takes IRM, which isn't actually part of the sewage project and isn't likely to get federal or provincial funding, out of the picture.

Instead, staff and Victoria Mayor Lisa Helps suggested processing food scraps and yard waste into compost at Hartland. That could help solve another embarrassing problem.

Since the composting facility at Stanhope Farm in Central Saanich was shut down because of odour complaints, Greater Victoria has been shipping its food scraps to Delta for \$114 a tonne. That's costly, and sending tonnes of our waste across the water to another municipality just looks bad. It was also supposed to be temporary.

The directors backed Helps's recommendation last week, but over the objections of some mayors, including Saanich's Richard Atwell and Metchosin's John Ranns.

Although the majority said IRM was too experimental, Atwell and Ranns argued it is being done elsewhere.

Atwell said he has seen a plant in Washington state that reduces wet sewage sludge to "pure drinking water, electricity and some ash." The plant generates most of its own power by burning the material.

"To me, it's scandalous to ignore substantial savings to the taxpayers," Ranns said.

What are taxpayers to make of these apparently contradictory sets of facts?

The region has ambitious plans to stop our centuries-old habit of dumping sewage, garbage and food scraps out of sight and out of mind. Reducing the amount of waste and finding uses for as much of it as possible would ease the burden we place on the planet.

With this decision, the CRD is committing to separate the various waste streams so they can be recycled and reused, rather than pursuing an integrated solution.

The directors might be missing out on cutting-edge technology, or they might — with the fiasco of the “cutting-edge” Blue Bridge in mind — be prudent stewards of public money.

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