

Effort to cap toxic stew awaits only city funding

ERIC MCGUINNESS, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR (Feb 16, 2010)

Hamilton has yet to come up with its one-third share of the Randle Reef cleanup cost more than two years after the federal and provincial governments pledged a total of \$60 million.

The environmental assessment is unfinished, the Hamilton Port Authority is refusing to manage the project and local officials are begging Public Works Canada to take over. All the while, a toxic stew of coal tar, metals and industrial chemicals on the floor of Hamilton Harbour continues to spread and disperse.

Randle Reef has been called a spill in slow motion. Lynda Lukasik, executive director of Environment Hamilton, says, "Now we have a cleanup in slow motion."

The plan is to build a steel wall around the most contaminated sediment beside U.S. Steel Canada's plant, then add material dredged from other areas and cap the structure to create two piers for the port authority.

When the McGuinty government announced its \$30-million pledge 30 months ago this week, it said work could start in 2008. No one can now say when it will begin. The cost has risen to \$105 million from \$90 million and it seems certain Hamilton has lost its chance to celebrate the harbour cleanup in 2015, when it welcomes thousands of visitors to the Pan Am Games.

Leaders of the Bay Area Restoration Council (BARC) have lost patience. They say it's time for citizens to put pressure on government agencies to get on with the job. BARC chairperson Debra McBride issued a statement saying her organization, once buoyed by promises of \$60 million in 2007, is very disappointed at the lack of action. "We were led to believe that the remaining one-third of the cost, the local portion, would be confirmed in short order. Yet, to date, not one cent of local funding has been publicly announced. As a result of this delay, the costs have risen to \$105 million and our target of delisting our harbour by 2015 as an area of concern, as defined by the International Joint Commission, has been compromised. We encourage the mayor and the Hamilton Port Authority to resolve this matter as soon as possible."

Bill Bardswick, regional director of the Ontario Ministry of the Environment, issued a statement confirming, "efforts have been unsuccessful to date to secure the one-third local commitment, which is \$35 million."

But as a result of questions asked by The Spectator, port authority president Bruce Wood revealed it has spent more than \$1 million on continuing design work and has agreed to ante up \$6 million toward the construction cost.

Mayor Fred Eisenberger insists the main issue isn't money, but the need to replace the authority as construction manager. "The biggest speed bump is who is going to be project leader," he said. Sources suggest new hands at the helm of the authority are worried about being responsible for possible cost overruns. Eisenberger said the authority "doesn't have the manpower or expertise," so it makes sense to turn to Public Works Canada, which is cleaning up the Sydney Tar Ponds in Nova Scotia, the only worse case of coal tar pollution in Canada. "We're close to finalizing that, and because it's going to be a nine-, 10- or 14-year project, the funding can still be sorted out. I can tell you the lion's share is in place and we are looking to Halton and Burlington to be partners."

David Christopherson, NDP MP for Hamilton Centre, said he hadn't heard about the port authority dropping its construction role and wondered why it hadn't said something earlier. "What's heartbreaking, though, is that this is the easiest part. The hard part was getting money from the senior levels of government, getting the players lined up. "I even let the Conservatives use me as one of their props for the announcement in 2007."

City MPs and MPPs met with the mayor late last week. Christopherson later said the five MPs had agreed to sign a letter asking Public Works Canada to step in as soon as possible.