

Sewage plant upgrades to still miss harbour cleanup goals

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The city will still fall shy of cleanup targets for Hamilton Harbour even after pouring nearly half a billion dollars into planned improvements at the Woodward Avenue sewage treatment plant.

Jim Harnum, the city's director of water and wastewater, acknowledged last week the plant won't be able to meet goals set by a remedial action plan to delist the harbour as a Great Lakes area of concern by 2015. But he said the upgrades will sharply cut the plant's output of suspended solids, phosphorous and ammonia without soaking taxpayers.

"What we're trying to do is find the best option we can afford," Mr. Harnum told the project's community liaison committee.

The upgrades include construction of a \$305-million membrane filter plant to remove more contaminants and treat up to 230 million litres of sewage per day, boosting overall capacity by nearly a quarter, to 500 million litres.

For short periods, Woodward will be able to treat double that flow, although it will still be overwhelmed on some rainy days.

"We're not going to achieve the final RAP targets in every area, but we're going to be as close as we're ever going to get," Mr. Harnum said. "We're in the same order of magnitude."

According to city projections, the plant's daily loadings of suspended solids, phosphorous and ammonia will be cut by between two-thirds and fourth-fifths.

Yet the ammonia contributions will still exceed the RAP target by near 90 per cent, with suspended solids doing so by 65 per cent and phosphorous by 23 per cent.

The plans are getting mixed reviews, but have the critical backing of organizations charged with cleaning up the harbour.

Jim Hudson, executive director of the Bay Area Restoration Council, urged Mr. Harnum "to get on with this as fast as you possibly can."

The upgrades are set to go before council in early November, with construction optimistically slated to begin next year and continue through 2011.

Mr. Hudson said though not perfect, the project will vastly improve the existing situation, much like the planned capping of the notorious toxic blob at Randle Reef, also seen as critical to the harbour's delisting.

"When you start balancing all of the other factors, like cost and time and benefits, my take is, let's not plan this thing to death," he said.

"Although we as BARC may be somewhat disappointed that we do not achieve all of the RAP standards, the benefits that this project is going to bring to this significantly outweigh the shortcomings."

That view was echoed by Kristin O'Connor, a member of a RAP technical review team that is also endorsing the upgrades, to be funded from water rates and development charges.

Proposing to make

"The RAP is satisfied with the progress," she said. "As a committee we decided we were pleased with the strides the City of Hamilton is proposing to make."

But Zen Matwiyiw, who lives near the sewage plant, said he's concerned about the inclusion of a \$60-million sludge incinerator in the plans.

Bad experiences with past ventures, including failed sludge driers and the former SWARU incinerator, leave him fearful his neighbourhood will be "the sacrificial lamb," he said.

The city estimates the new incinerator -- which is undergoing a separate study -- will increase emissions of harmful sulphur and nitrogen dioxides in Hamilton by 0.003 per cent.

"For us, it's going to affect us because it's going to be concentrated in our area, Mr. Matwiyiw said.

"How much can you hoot and holler? You expect the city to protect us," he said. "(With SWARU), they closed it down because it was going to cost them more money to retrofit it. They were concerned about the financial part of it, not the health of the people."

Dr. George Sorger, a McMaster University microbiologist who has long criticized the Woodward plant's performance, said he shares Mr. Matwiyiw's concerns.

"Those are nasty things," he said of the dioxides. "People who are close to the source, they're not going to be experiencing the average for the whole region, they're going to be experiencing the concentration at the source."

Dr. Sorger, who clashed with Mr. Harnum over the role of the liaison committee during the meeting, said he is reserving judgment on the sewage-treatment upgrades because of a lack of data and technical details.