

## **Election Backgrounder – Sewage Issue**

### **Summary of the sewage issue**

“Co-treatment” is a proposal for Powell River to pay Catalyst to treat the city’s sewage in the mill’s treatment plant and dismantle the city’s own sewage plants.

Some councillors argue that co-treatment would enable the city to save money until it can afford to build its own plant and would help Catalyst by paying them a \$500,000 yearly fee.

Concerns raised about having Catalyst take over sewage treatment include:

- the possibility that the mill could close. Catalyst had to seek bankruptcy protection in 2012, making this possibility more real.
- the lack of guarantees under bankruptcy laws that the city could still have access to the mill’s treatment plant if the mill closes.
- the increased fees and poor service experienced in other communities when they privatized their public services.
- co-treatment locks in privatization. Under free trade agreements, once Powell River pays Catalyst to take over treatment of city sewage, this service can never be made public again.<sup>i</sup>

### **Background**

In 2001, Council started work on a plan to build its own “consolidated” public sewage plant, one that would replace the existing plants in Townsite and Westview. The provincial government approved the plan for a public treatment plant in 2006.

In 2008, Catalyst asked Council for a contract to take over sewage treatment from the city. The City’s engineer at the time described the co-treatment proposal as a “\$15- to \$20-million gamble on the future of Catalyst.”

In 2011, the City’s application for funding for co-treatment was rejected.

Over the past seven years Council has paid consultants to do studies on whether it is feasible and affordable for Catalyst to treat City sewage. In 2014, the City’s engineering consultant advised Council that the mill’s treatment plant was too large and too expensive for the City to run on its own if the mill closed.

### **Current status of co-treatment**

Council recently sought the advice of another consultant on whether municipal sewage can be treated at the mill’s plant if the mill closes. No analysis has yet been done on whether the idea he proposed is affordable.

The majority of Council – with the exception of Councillor Palm – has asked consultants to find an alternative to using the mill’s large old open storage tank (clarifier) to store city sewage when the mill undergoes temporary full shutdowns.

According to the timeline in Council's five year financial plan, construction on co-treatment would start in 2017. The City would spend \$10 million for co-treatment infrastructure. \$2 million of this would be spent on sewer lines to the mill that would be abandoned if the City ever builds its own public plant. According to the financial plan, the city would build its own sewage treatment plant in 2032. Under trade agreements, once Powell River has allowed a private corporation to take over sewage treatment the City can never operate it as a public service again.

### **Feedback from the public on co-treatment**

The City held two consultations on co-treatment attended by 111 and 157 residents. The report on these consultations said that co-treatment "was rejected on all levels" and that people wanted a public sewage plant. The mayor and some councillors have said these results do not represent the community.

The City-appointed advisory committee also recommended – with the exception of the Catalyst representative - against co-treatment and in favour of a public plant. The majority of councillors rejected the committee's recommendation in a September 2012 vote.

A planned Town Hall accountability session to explain Council's decision to go ahead with co-treatment was not held.

Councillors Dee, Hathaway, and Palm promised a referendum on co-treatment, but rejected having one in 2011 and now in the 2014 civic election because they say there is not yet enough information.

### **Positions of candidates on the sewage issue**

These are the responses candidates gave at the October 28 all candidates' meeting to the question "Are you in favour of city sewage going to Catalyst – yes or no?"<sup>ii</sup>

Ron Ostensen: "A very definite maybe."

Anita Adams: No

Jim Barron: Yes

Carole Anne Leishman: No

William Ashforth: No

Myrna Leishman: "I'm still waiting for all the information to come in." (While on Council, Leishman voted in favour of proceeding with a public sewage plant.<sup>iii</sup>)

Maggie Hathaway: "I'm kind of with Myrna - it's hard to say yes or no." (While on Council, Hathaway voted against proceeding with a public sewage plant.)

Rob Southcott: No

Karen Skadsheim: "I'm absolutely not in favor of sending essential public services to a private corporation."

Debbie Dee: “With all due respect this is more than a yes or no answer. It's not handing over public services to a private corporation - it's way more complicated than that.” (While on Council, Dee voted against proceeding with a public sewage plant.)

Dave Dickson: “Basically, it’s a no.”

Russell Brewer: No (While on Council, Brewer voted in favour of proceeding with a public sewage plant.)

Jim Palm: “The ‘no’s’ seem to be getting a lot of claps here. As the chair of our Liquid Waste Management Committee it's far more complicated than a yes or no answer.”(While on Council, Palm voted against proceeding with a public sewage plant. He was the only Councillor to vote against removing the clarifier from the co-treatment plan<sup>iv</sup>.)

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<sup>i</sup> The federal government explains on its website how its trade agreement with the European Union makes privatization permanent: “whenever a government liberalizes, that level of liberalization is locked in” <http://international.gc.ca/trade-agreements-accords-commerciaux/agr-acc/ceta-aecg/understanding-comprendre/technical-technique.aspx?lang=eng>

<sup>ii</sup> The recording of candidates’ answers on the sewage issue is available about 1/3 the way through at <http://podcast.cjmp.ca/index.php?date=2014-10>

<sup>iii</sup> September 18, 2012 vote. <https://powellriver.civicweb.net/Documents/DocumentList.aspx?ID=3033>

<sup>iv</sup> April 17, 2014 vote. <https://powellriver.civicweb.net/Documents/DocumentList.aspx?ID=18119>