

# Regional wastewater services to be studied

Foothills: Towns, MD to look for ways to collaborate on water treatment

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By: Don Patterson



Suzanne Oel, co-chairperson of the Foothills Regional Water and Wastewater Collaborative, looks over the Sheep River on Okotoks' east end. The group has begun a study looking at options to expand wastewater treatment in the Foothills.

Don Patterson/OWW

Foothills municipalities are taking the first step towards joining together to treat waste water in the region.

The Foothills Regional Water and Wastewater Collaborative has hired a consultant to do a feasibility study investigating potential options for a regional wastewater service.

Suzanne Oel, collaborative co-chairperson and MD councillor, said the study will allow municipalities to determine whether there are areas wherein they can work together.

“What we’re hoping to get out of this is a review of basic infrastructure options for regional wastewater and look at supplemental treatment options above our current ability,” she said.

The study will look at things like existing treatment capacity, constraints to expanding existing infrastructure and feasibility of different options, said Oel.

The collaborative has awarded a contract to MPE and Urban Systems to write the feasibility study. The work is being covered by a \$250,000 Alberta Community Partnerships Grant.

A technical committee comprised of staff from the Town’s of High River, Okotoks, Black Diamond, the MD of Foothills, and the Highwood Public Advisory Committee will oversee the work.

Oel said the collaborative hopes to have a draft report back from its consultant by the end of the year and a final report listing the most viable options early in the new year. She said the group plans to start with a list of four options and eventually narrow it down to two for collaborative members to choose from.

The collaborative is currently not looking at projects to provide drinking water for residents in foothills communities, although Oel said it could in the future. For now she said members are able to meet their current water needs and the more pressing need is for wastewater treatment.

“It is in our work plan but we decided amongst our communities that our priority is wastewater because of the challenges that Okotoks is facing, they’re coming close to their [wastewater treatment] capacity and they’re not the only ones,” she said. “Okotoks is assessing its capacity, as well as High River which is looking at other things, Nanton is too, Turner Valley, Black Diamond are planning for upgrades.”

The collaborative’s second priority is identifying steps to protect water sources for the Sheep and Highwood rivers.

“The real thing a lot of people on this committee are looking to do is keep the rivers at the centre of the discussion,” she said.

Okotoks coun. Ed Sands said this will be important to protect the town’s water supply.

Okotoks is working to build a water pipeline from Calgary, but Sands said it is intended to supplement the town’s water needs beyond what it draws from the Sheep River. He said it’s important to protect water quality in the Sheep River as it will continue to be a source of water for the community.

“There’s a lot of stuff between us and upstream at the source (of the river) that can be sources of contamination,” said Sands. “We do have a state of the art water treatment system. The main thing is keeping it as clear as possible going in.”

It’s also important to protect the environment for fish in the Sheep River and animals that rely on it, he said.

Sands said the feasibility study will give Okotoks potential options in the coming years when it will need to expand its own wastewater treatment capacity.

“What are we going to do in Okotoks when we get water for 80,000 more people? We’ve got a sewage treatment for 5,000 to 10,000 more people,” he said. “Do we expand our own plant or do we look at other ways to do it?”

While drinking water is not currently part of the group’s work Sands hopes there could be more co-operation in this area in the future.