



Rivers Aren't Sewer Pipes

I'm just checking in to see if you got your water and waste bill this month? I certainly got mine and quite frankly it put me into a state of shock. \$620.00 dollars in garbage and sewage fees to service three adults for three months.

I shudder to think what a family of six is paying.

I mean, I know we need to fix our sewer problems, but did it really require this kind of sudden sticker shock? Especially when the city has known for two decades that our combined sewer system and water treatment plants needed to be radically upgraded.

So why is it taking so long? Why are we still dumping billions of litres of raw sewage into our rivers every year and, at the back end, shipping out so-called treated wastewater overloaded with the kind of nutrients that help to fuel the toxic algal blooms on Lake Winnipeg?

And why the heck isn't every citizen in Winnipeg up in arms about it?

Look, I don't begrudge paying my fair share to stop this environmental travesty, but when the city says it will take until 2095 – a whopping 70 years - to deal with the combined sewage overflows, I am left just this side of apoplectic.

And I am not alone. Councillor Brian Mayes, onetime chair of the city's Water Waste and Environment Committee has been known to fume about it as well, because, as he puts it: "This isn't 13th century France, and we're not building Chartres cathedral. We can't wait 70 years to fix this problem!"

The picture only gets even worse when you look at the planned upgrades for the North End wastewater treatment plant. According to Mayes, the phase that would remove the nitrogen and phosphate nutrients that cause Lake Winnipeg to turn green still remains "largely notional." Read here: "Not gonna happen anytime soon."

So how did we get into this pickle?

Well I would argue it's a case of "out of sight out of mind. Winnipeegers literally didn't see what was going on. At least not until the pandemic, when half the city was out walking our frozen rivers and witnessed the toilet-paper strewn bilge that was regularly spilling over onto the pristine snow and ice.



But once witnessed, how many of us wrote to our MPs, MLA's and Councillors demanding that they use our tax money to fix the damn problem and clean up our rivers? Well, a few of us did but for the most part it was crickets.

It's been crickets in the hallowed halls of the provincial legislature and parliament as well.

In fact the province, which holds regulatory power, has steadfastly avoided imposing deadlines on the city to solve its sewage problems faster. And while the province and feds

have ponied up for the sewage treatment upgrades they've offered zero cash to help solve the sewer overflows that are contaminating our rivers.

The fact that the city itself has been siphoning off water and waste funds to the tune of 8% to 12% for the last 15 years, to avoid hiking our property taxes and fund things like road projects, certainly didn't help.

Apparently, the old cliché of "pay now or pay a lot more later" didn't occur to a mayor and councillors anxious to avoid a ballot box killer like a tax increase.

The upshot? We're now looking at a \$3 billion bill for an upgraded treatment plant that would have cost less than a third of that in 2011. As for sewage overflows, we'd need to spend an additional \$90 million a year or roughly \$2 billion between now and 2045 to fix that problem.

Instead, we'll be spending just \$30 million a year. Thus the 70 year timeline for sewer pipe upgrades.

All of which leaves me with a number of questions.



Garbage collected from the Seine River

Why don't we care more about our rivers and lakes? Why aren't we outraged that we're poisoning the Red and Assiniboine to such an extent that 99% of us wouldn't even stick a toe in the water.

Waters which, as Free Press reporter Julia Simone Rutgers recently confirmed, contain a host of pollutants and life-threatening diseases from E-coli and dysentery to polio.

Why do so many Winnipeggers think that our rivers are just dumping grounds for everything from oil barrels to human waste? Why don't we see them for what they are – living, breathing, complex ecosystems that can be pushed to a tipping point?

And with climate change, that tipping point may arrive well before 2095. So let's ensure that city council gets the message – our rivers aren't sewage pipes and waiting 70 years to clean them up is *NOT* an option.

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