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Flood of issues surrounds water-taking permit application

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An application to increase water usage has released a flood of resistance for local spring water bottling company, Flamborough Springs.

The company has applied to the Ministry of the Environment (MOE) to increase its water drawing capacity from 1.7 tankers a day, to 11 tankers a day, for the next 10 years, from its 11th Concession well.

Ward 15 councillor Margaret McCarthy is firmly opposing the move, because she feels it will interfere with Carlisle's communal wells. The community has been under watering bans for the past five summers, due to a lack of water. Although the MOE is the decision-making body in the matter, McCarthy called a public meeting last week to inform local residents, and encourage them to oppose the expansion.

"I don't buy that there's enough water in the aquifer," she said. "We're the ones who know. We live it."

Of the roughly 75 residents who attended the meeting, several reflected her concern. Several wanted to know what provisions would be in place to turn off Flamborough Springs' tap should a run of dry summers threatens the groundwater supply.

"When that water turns up in Florida, how does that benefit us when we go dry?" asked one resident. "At least with a farmer, you retain that water. You can buy his food. This is exporting."

Many felt it was hypocritical for Flamborough Springs to be permitted more water, while Carlisle taps run dry.

"We've got Flamborough Springs wanting to bottle and sell it for profit, and we're the ones paying taxes," said one resident.

McCarthy charged that the MOE would leave the community high and dry in the event of a water shortage, because it would work to defend its decision.

But according to Carl Slater, technical Support Manager for the West Central Region of the MOE, every water taking permit comes with a clause to protect existing users. It calls for the permit holder to stop pumping, reduce pumping or to compensate those who are affected by the permit, either in terms of water shortages, or water quality.

Water quantity isn't the issue, as far as city staff is concerned. According to Jim Harnum, senior director of water and wastewater for the city, scientific models show that the aquifer, or underground river, which supplies the area, is a stable body of water fed by Georgian Bay.

Carlisle's historic water problems stem from the city's own permit to take water, which has fallen short of the community's demand, he said. The city has been working for the past several years to rectify the situation. They have recently been approved for an increase in their water-taking permit, and are currently building a new tower to store the new water.

However, the city has expressed concern that there may be possible contamination issues, not with Carlisle, but with Freelfton, if the permit is passed.

The area has both ground and surface water, noted Harnum. Because the Freelfton well and Flamborough Springs well draw from roughly the same depth, staff feel the groundwater sources are connected. But what concerns them is the surface water; if enough water is drawn from the aquifer, there is a remote chance that the surface water, which requires a higher level of treatment to be drinkable, could be drawn down into the aquifer, which only requires chlorinization.

"I want to stress, that it's a suspicion the city has. It's not a fact," he said. "It's not happening now, and it may never happen. It may be a wrong assumption."

To have their concerns addressed, the city's hydrogeological experts are meeting with experts from Flamborough Springs to compare data. If the water quality concerns still exist after the meetings, the city will notify the MOE of the issue, said Harnum.

The Halton Conservation Authority has also expressed concerns about the application, in terms of its possible impact on the ecosystem. Although they have no firm data on the issue, they're concerned there could be a chance that the increased water taking could impact Bronte Creek, and the surrounding wetlands, affecting migration and breeding patterns.

The HCA plans to submit a letter to the MOE outlining their concerns, according to Watershed Planner David Gale.

Although representatives of Flamborough Springs were invited to attend the meeting, they chose not to send a representative, because they weren't required to, according to Flamborough Springs president, Ian Hendrie.

He feels his company has been careful to follow the procedures outlined by the MOE. For instance, the MOE informed him that the water permit would only be renewed, unless they worked co-operatively with the city and residents. So the company has been in meetings with the city, and went door-to-door with information about the application, which only received two negative comments from homeowners.

Environment

He claims his company is mindful of the environment. "It behooves us not to contaminate the environment, and it behooves us not to affect people's wells," he said. "That water is our livelihood."

Although the permit will drastically increase the company's ability to draw water, growth won't happen overnight, said Hendrie. The increased capacity will give them the flexibility they need to accept contracts in the future. "We hope we can grow to that capacity over the years," he said. "We don't want to limit our natural growth."

There are provisions in the MOE guidelines, noted one resident present at the meeting, which prevent companies from applying for more water than they need, but Hendrie believes there's flexibility in the guidelines.

Forcing companies to re-apply with each shift in production would be cost prohibitive because each application process costs thousands of dollars in consultants and application fees, he noted.

"That would stymie free enterprise and stymie business," he said. "There has to be some flexibility in there."

But according to Slater of the MOE, the provisions are in place for the Director, not the applicant.

"You can apply for as much as you like, for as long as you like," he said. But if the Director feels the company has no need for the water, the application could be rejected, or either the term or allowed water levels could be lowered. He noted that the drawing of water is monitored by the MOE; Flamborough Springs is required to make regular reports to the Ministry, and they are required to install a water metre. Additional monitoring provisions could also be added to the permit, if the Director feels it's warranted.

The application process cost the company \$3,000 in MOE fees, said Slater.

Hendrie disagreed with residents at the meeting who charged that he sells the free resource for pure profit.

His company pays for taxes salaries, equipment and electricity.

"Compare it to a fisherman," he suggested. "He has expenses. So has he paid for his fish? Indirectly, yes."

Several homeowners at the meeting also expressed concern that their private wells, which are shallow to avoid "sulphur water" found underneath, could be drained by the increased usage.

But experts from both the city and the company feel that isn't a concern. "We're in agreement there," said Harnum.

Regardless, Councillor McCarthy urged residents with concerns to contact the MOE personally; officials there have already heard her point of view, but told her they want to hear resident's concerns directly.

"You know the technical data on your property. They need to hear that," she said.

One man at the meeting expressed concerns that McCarthy was unfairly targeting Flamborough Springs, because she wasn't opposing existing water permits for local greenhouses and golf courses. But that's because those permits aren't up for renewal or expansion, she noted.

Because the final decision rest in the hands of the MOE, she and the public only have one window to oppose water permits, and only in a comment capacity.

"Once it's passed, there's nothing we can do," she said.

Abdul Khan, manager of water and wastewater told the crowd that although the Flamborough Springs application is likely to pass, credible complaints from local residents could raise enough red flags at the MOE to have conditions placed on the permit.

An example of a condition might be to require the company to monitor the wells of neighbours, or have the permit reviewed in a year's time, he noted.

The MOE has already received several calls from local residents, according to Slater. Every comment is factored into the decision, along with analysis from MOE engineers and geo scientists.

The deadline for public comment on the application is Tuesday, February 28.



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