

# **No turning back on sewage treatment**

**Penner's deadlines reinforce the need to focus on cost-effective approaches**

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The sewage-treatment deadlines set by Environment Minister Barry Penner this week might prove overly ambitious, but it is time to get going on finding the most cost-effective solutions.

If the Capital Regional District and communities show significant progress, they should be able to count on additional time to explore new technologies and innovative uses for waste.

If they don't, we risk an imposed solution and a weakening of the CRD's bargaining position in seeking additional help from the federal and provincial governments.

Penner has set a tight timeline. The CRD has until June 30 to submit a business plan for the \$1.2-billion project.

By the end of next year, Penner wants details on sites, the possibility of using the waste to produce energy, more detailed cost estimates, environmental studies and a review of whether the sewage treatment plants should be built or operated by a private company.

It's hard to see all that work being done within 12 months, but a serious start can be made.

We accept the concerns about the costs and benefits raised by well-informed critics of treatment, but believe that debate is over, for four reasons.

First, the 2006 scientific panel report prepared for the CRD made a credible case for treatment. The report was maddeningly vague, but concluded "prudent public policy" would see work begin now.

It reported seabed contamination at the waste outfalls; warned that the sewage plume that rises to the surface on occasion is a health risk to anyone who contacts it; and noted that claims the waste poses an environmental threat cannot be effectively refuted. (The review is at [www.crd.bc.ca/es/](http://www.crd.bc.ca/es/).)

Second, the lack of treatment is a continuing blot on the city's image and a threat to the tourism industry. The 2005 Maclean's cover story "From Sea to Stinking Sea," which highlighted the region's sewage practices, is an example of the damaging publicity that will continue.

The lack of treatment for the 129 million litres of waste water dumped into the ocean each day is also a real risk to U.S.-based tourism. One campaign by an environmental group could do lasting damage.

Third, one of the key arguments against treatment is fallacious.

Opponents argue that the money -- especially the \$400-million contributions from each of the federal and provincial governments -- could produce more benefits if it were spent on transit or health care.

It's an interesting theoretical debate, but that is not an option. The money is only available for sewage treatment. If it is not seized now, the contributions might not be available in future.

Finally, the federal and provincial governments have made it clear the treatment question has been decided.

Penner's position could not be clearer; federal Environment Minister John Baird wants treatment; and new federal regulations will require it by 2020.

Most regional residents should welcome the decision. The benefits will come at a significant but not punitive cost to local taxpayers -- perhaps \$100 to \$150 a year per household.

The debate now -- and it is critically important -- should be about what kind of treatment and where.

Decisions have to be based on a range of factors, from minimizing disruptions to existing communities to capturing the energy potential of sewage.

Related measures, like control of contaminants at source and improvements to the aging storm sewer system need to be considered at the same time.

None of this will be simple, but it's time to get on with the job.