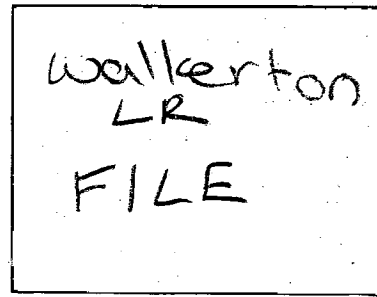


WALKERTON 2003 MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

By Bruce Davidson



For the people of Walkerton it seems almost surreal that nearly three years have past since the water borne E. coli tragedy in the spring of the year 2000. With the passage of time, a degree of individual and communal healing has taken place. However, we still find ourselves in the unenviable position of having far more questions than answers regarding the future of our citizens and the prospect of enforceable legislation that will provide genuine protection for Ontario's drinking water.

In this brief update, we shall explore a number of issues that are of great concern to the people of Walkerton and will undoubtedly have ramifications for all citizens for the province of Ontario. The topics will include legislative attempts to protect Ontario's drinking water supply, the ongoing health problems of our people, financial compensation and Walkerton's search for a permanent source of drinking water.

As the water tragedy unfolded the confidence and trust of the people of Walkerton in their local and provincial governments was completely eroded leaving the residents feeling betrayed and ignored. Both the provincial and municipal governments seemed far more interested in distancing themselves from the tragedy than in finding the answers to the questions that plagued the minds of the people. How could this tragedy have happened and what must we do to ensure that it never happens again?

After a difficult struggle led by Concerned Walkerton Citizens (CWC), CELA and both provincial opposition parties, the government announced the formation of a full public inquiry into the Walkerton water tragedy to be led by Justice Dennis O'Connor. The appointment of Justice O'Connor was the first step in the restoration of the dignity of the people of Walkerton. Justice O'Connor pledged to leave no stone unturned in the investigation of the causes of the tragedy.

The Walkerton Inquiry, which began in the fall of 2000, culminated in a set of recommendations, which logically evolved from the evidence presented before the commission. These recommendations provide a blueprint for the protection of drinking water from source to tap for the people of Ontario. The challenge before us is to ensure that the recommendations of the Walkerton Inquiry are fully implemented.

CWC believes that the government of Ontario must ensure that legislation regarding nutrient management, the *Safe Drinking Water Act*, and upcoming watershed protection legislation must be seamlessly woven together if the drinking water of Ontario is to be protected and preserved. Currently, we remain unconvinced regarding this government's willingness to commit the resources necessary to assure comprehensive watershed protection. The people of this province must demand that their government adopt a proactive approach supported by scientific research to all areas of environmental protection if future tragedies are to be avoided.

One of the many challenges confronting the people of Walkerton is the struggle to be fairly compensated for their various losses. The compensation plan ultimately agreed to by the government of Ontario provides for an initial payment of \$2,000.00 per resident of Walkerton in the first phase of the plan. The second phase of the plan is designed to compensate those whom experienced inconvenience as a result of the eight months of disrupted water service as well as those who suffered economic loss due to the contamination of the town's water. A basic offer of \$4,000.00 per adult and \$1,000.00 per child is generally presented to the citizens of Walkerton for the inconvenience of being without potable water during the approximate eight month' boil water order. It is estimated that the rigors of being without potable water added approximately 3 - 4 hours of work per day per adult in each household.

While the citizens of Walkerton are making claims for a variety of economic losses, clearly the most difficult situations lie in the area of compensation for ongoing illnesses. Our citizens have experienced great difficulty in having the validity of their illnesses recognized for the purpose of compensation. Probably the greatest single fear of the people affected by the E. coli tragedy centers on the future health of our children. If the health of our children should deteriorate some years from now it is entirely possible that a future government and the courts may fail to link their illnesses with the consumption of contaminated water. The Walkerton tragedy may be viewed as a distant event in the past, potentially leaving our children physically and financially devastated.

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A recent update by the physicians of the Walkerton Health Study suggests that the majority of the studies' participants are in good health and experiencing no major effects from the consumption of contaminated water. However, it must be noted that the physicians also reported that hundreds of our citizens are still experiencing irritable bowel problems, the doctor suggests that these conditions are likely to abate within the next few years. A number of other symptoms have been reported throughout our community including kidney problems, reactive arthritis, bladder infections, neurological disorders, and some as yet unexplained cardiac concerns. There also have been a number of younger citizens whom have developed conditions leading to appendectomies and the removal of gallbladders.

CWC is troubled by the fact that the physicians conducting the Health Study have appeared to have no knowledge of the appendectomy and gallbladder problems. We are also concerned that the Health Study does not appear to be probing the affects of the five parasites found in Walkerton's water and that no mass stool sampling are currently being undertaken.

Shortly after the water crisis occurred, it was determined that the wells and well fields supplying Walkerton with drinking water would undergo thorough investigations to determine their suitability as acceptable sources of supply for the town. An environmental assessment process has been underway for more than two years and continues to evaluate a number of potential

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These options have included utilizing the existing well field located a number of kilometers from well number 5, which was the contamination access point into the water system in the year 2000. Other potential sources of water include a totally new field, the Saugeen River, and a number of water pipelines with one originating near the neighbouring town of Hanover. Pipelines from the shores of Lake Huron or Georgian Bay are also under consideration.

CWC's major concern with the Georgian Bay and Lake Huron pipeline options regard the implications for watershed protection. In the event that one of these pipeline options is chosen to supply Walkerton, how will the need to protect the watershed from contamination be viewed when it is no longer regarded as a source of drinking water for the town? Would activities be permitted in the watershed that could potentially lead to its contamination that otherwise would be prohibited if it were to serve as the town's water source? What are the potential implications for local development, would a pipeline become a magnet for residential, industrial or agricultural development that may not be appropriate for the region? What is the potential outcome if it becomes the norm for small urban communities of a few thousand people to draw their water from the Great Lakes from a radius of 60 - 100 kilometers away from the source?

Box (pullout quote): CWC's annual *Greenstep Environmental Fair* takes place on Saturday, May 24th at the Walkerton Community Centre.

Many more questions than answers demand that CWC continue to fight for the protection of Ontario's drinking water. We will undertake a number of initiatives designed to inform the public of the ongoing need to protect our water sources. These initiatives include our annual *Greenstep Environmental Fair*, taking place on Saturday, May 24th at the Walkerton Community Centre. The development of a water reference centre chronicling the E. coli disaster including many informative publications focusing on sustainable water and environmental management practices. CWC will continue to be proactive in the ongoing struggle for a safer environment. We urge all citizens of Ontario to see the environment as their responsibility and to do the same.

*Bruce Davidson is the spokesperson
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