

## Water aware

Controversial proposal increases aquifer awareness

Written by [Carolyn Camilleri](#)

When the town of Gibsons, B.C., embarked on the community-outreach component of its aquifer-mapping study, the goal was to foster engagement in the town's efforts to sustain and protect its most precious resource. Evidently, it's working.



The quaint harbour town of Gibsons, B.C., is the site of a big development controversy centred on the community's aquifer.

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The study, which ran from 2009 to 2013, provided the town with comprehensive information about the aquifer, along with recommendations for managing this natural asset. In a Fall 2012 article\* in Ground Water Canada about the study, lack of interest in the aquifer was identified as a concern. But all that has changed, and, in recent months, the aquifer has become a sensitive issue in a heated controversy.

The controversy has come about, in part, due to a development proposal. "The George" is a hotel, residential and conference complex that, if accepted by council, will be the largest—and tallest—development in the community of 4,400 residents.

"The controversy is essentially – are you in favour or not of the George development," says Dave Newman, director of engineering for the town of Gibsons. "There are strong views on both sides—if you want to call them sides—and one of the concerns is the potential of the development to have an impact on the Gibsons aquifer."

Meanwhile, there has been a gradually building awareness of the aquifer, says Newman, "and then the current proposal comes in and one of the first things out of the block is 'What is this going to do to the aquifer?'"

According to Suzanne Senger, president of the Gibsons Alliance of Business and Community Society (GABC), for the first six or seven months after the proposal was first submitted, people recognized there was an issue but figured the town would resolve it.

"In November [2013], when the redesign came back and those issues hadn't been dealt with yet, that was when terms like 'catastrophic blow out' started to come out into the public realm," she says. "It is a motherhood issue. People are really protective and defensive."

The problem is this: in the original development application, the George's foundation penetrates 14 feet into the aquitard.

"It was pretty clear that this is a seriously risky situation and so we did the advocacy thing and went to the town and said, 'Look, you know, we've got these big concerns,'" says Senger. "But we were getting quite, I don't want to say stonewalled, but basically, the messaging we were getting back was, 'Don't worry, don't worry, it's all good.'"

But the aquifer is just one concern with the George. Senger says the GABC has three "requests" for the town, with "no risk to the aquifer and no excavation into the aquitard" topping the list. The other two concerns are for due diligence and no dredging in an area considered toxic and "respect the official community plan," which addresses building height.

For Mayor Wayne Rowe, the real controversy is about the town's future direction and is "amongst those who really don't want to see anything change or feel that the magnitude of the change is more than they are comfortable with and another large part of the community that feels the time has come for the town to encourage development."

As for Senger's charge that "council is divided," Rowe clarifies that council, like the public, is divided over the degree of change in the community but is clear on the aquifer.

"All of council would agree that if we had a report that came back that said if you even put one stick in the ground here, you are going to contaminate the system, I think that would be the end of [the George]," he says.

So while so much focus is on the aquifer, it is not negotiable—for either "side."

"As far as the George is concerned, the overarching position of the town is that we are not prepared to compromise the health and integrity of the Gibsons aquifer—full stop," says Newman.

Rowe adds that statements are being made without "adequate factual foundation" and that the town is in the process of gathering those facts. To speed up that process, the GABC enlisted the services of an engineer who looked over the proposal. The GABC report, created by K.G. Farquharson, P. Eng, an associate of Senger's, indicates that the excavation would indeed penetrate the aquitard. When the town didn't include their report in a council meeting, the GABC, in a website article, suggested the town was "suppressing information."

Asked about the GABC report, Newman describes the two-page document as "hugely incomplete."

What the town is waiting for are reports—required by the Town and paid for by the developer—that meet some very specific standards for addressing the aquifer concerns. The building site has been identified as both a geotechnical- and environmental-development permit area, says Newman, and the developers must follow a permit-application process.

In addition to geotechnical peer review by Levelton Consultants Ltd., a hydrogeological peer review is

being undertaken by Waterline, the company that was responsible for the aquifer-mapping study. The town has hired Waterline to monitor the hydrogeology work being completed by the developer.

"The Town has to be happy with the results of this and, if our hydrogeologist is not happy with this, then we are not happy," says Newman.

Gibsons' hydrogeologist is Darren David, VP of B.C. operations and principal hydrogeologist at Waterline Resources. He says the town is being proactive when it comes to aquifer protection by requiring a hydrogeologist and geotechnical engineer to peer review proposed developments located over, or near, the most sensitive part of the Gibsons aquifer.

"The aquifer is complex and, in Lower Gibsons, the capping layer on top of the aquifer—the aquitard—is most sensitive, as it is thinner and closer to the surface than elsewhere in Gibsons," says David. "Waterline's role is to share existing aquifer data with the developer and, as the developer's consultant collects new geological and ground water data at their site, this data is in turn shared with the town."

Until the reviews are completed, the town is using the opportunity to further aquifer education, including a clever YouTube video titled "The George Hotel Review Process," and to correct some misconceptions, says Newman.

"I get a kick out of the fact that you hear the word "aquitard" come off people's lips," he says. "And it's awesome because people are aware that there is something going on underneath there."

The new information being gathered for the development will be used to further understanding of the aquifer, says Newman. For example, the development-permit area is being established and will become part of Gibsons' official community plan.

Meanwhile, the plan to increase aquifer awareness continues, including a summer workshop for kids and an educational walking tour.

And for now, the controversy, which Senger says "has pitted neighbours against neighbours," is also continuing. For Newman, the positive in this is the increased awareness, and he says the town is staying its course and following through on processes.

"It just gives us a lot of comfort that we are treating this hugely precious resource in such a responsible manner," says Newman. "Council is fully on board with this and recognizes the value of the aquifer and the importance of making sure that we operate and maintain it in a way so that we have it there for generations to come."

\*"Proactive protection: Taking active steps to sustain a pristine aquifer," Ground Water Magazine, Fall 2012

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*Carolyn Camilleri has been a writer and editor in Victoria for the past 15 years and now divides her time between Toronto and Vancouver Island, writing for several trade and consumer magazines across the country.*