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April 2018: Talk of the Town by Jeremy Valeriote

Water is a big issue these days. Letters related to water supply and drought management appear in our local newspapers almost weekly. Debate over the Chapman watershed, the principal drinking water source for the Sunshine Coast, has been ongoing for decades. Globally, we are hearing about Cape Town, South Africa, the first major city close to running out of water.

While local governments continue work on our water problem, a reliable, resilient regional water supply eludes us. It's a complex issue and there is no 'silver bullet' to this challenge – it will require multiple solutions and continued adaptation to the impacts of climate change.

One of the most effective solutions has been water metering to detect leaks and encourage conservation. Gibsons was a leader in adopting this strategy and has seen impressive results over the past few years, reducing water use by 40% or more. Water metering has helped the SCRD dramatically reduce its water use, with more than 5,000 meters still to be installed. The SCRD has also identified additional storage and supply projects such as the Chapman Lake drawdown, potential groundwater sources and construction of a new reservoir.

When the SCRD identified the Gibsons Aquifer as a potential regional groundwater source, it triggered concern from the Town about the security of water supply for the community of 20, 50 and 100 years from now. Gibsons offered to help by servicing 'Zone 3' (the one-quarter of Gibsons residents currently served by the Chapman watershed) with water from the Gibsons Aquifer. This would decrease our use of Chapman water from 27% of the Town's total annual water use to 1% needed for extreme peak and fire flows, and make 230 million litres of water available to other regional users annually.

We know this change is possible thanks to the Town's extensive study and mapping of the aquifer that firmly established its value as a key natural asset. The Town has closely monitored the aquifer ever since, to ensure it can sustain us with clean, reliable water, forever.

The potential for a disjointed approach to water highlights the need for a new regional leadership model for watershed management and water supply. The Town has proposed a working group to talk about how to bring more partners to the water governance table, including First Nations, relevant provincial authorities, technical experts and other stakeholders.

A coordinated, collaborative approach to managing our Sunshine Coast watersheds could be the long-term solution to our water supply challenge. Disagreements could be resolved using consistent, proactive, evidence-based decision-making, and removed from the highly charged political environment created by acute water restrictions.

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"Nature is our most valuable asset"

When it comes to a shared regional resource like water, the only way to serve the needs of residents is to engage the community and work together toward our common goal: an adequate, reliable supply of clean drinking water. It will take work, but the payoff will be worth it.

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