



TOWN OF GIBSONS

PO Box 340
474 South Fletcher Road
Gibsons BC | V0N 1V0

T 604-886-2274

F 604-886-9735

info@gibsons.ca

www.gibsons.ca

OFFICE OF THE MAYOR | SILAS WHITE

May 31, 2023

0530-60

Honourable David Eby
Premier
PO BOX 9041 STN PROV GOVT
Victoria, BC V8W 9E1

Delivered via email: premier@gov.bc.ca

RE: Sunshine Coast Regional Water

Dear Premier and Ministers,

Another Sunshine Coast summer is upon us. These days, this is not only synonymous with visitors and locals alike enjoying our coastline, lakes, and mountain biking and hiking trails—and despising BC Ferries lineups—it also means a high likelihood of drought and water shortage.

And quite likely, it means another state of local emergency like we had last summer. As you surely recall, last fall and winter our State of Local Emergency extended into mid-November due to the horrifically unprecedented overlap of drought and freezing, preventing Chapman Lake from replenishing with water even when precipitation started again.

As someone who has lived on the Sunshine Coast all my life and has even been in local government during too many other droughts, this is something I never imagined happening until it did, last year.

Unsurprisingly, this situation exhausted key staff in the Sunshine Coast Regional District (SCRD) regional water function. As well, supply chain and project management issues that have plagued many governments post-pandemic have further delayed the one new water supply project with any hope to offer any relief this summer, the Church Road Well.

No meteorological studies of the summer so far are giving us much hope that we can expect more precipitation than last year; in fact, some data (including from the balmy May we've been having) suggest that we can only expect worse.

Here in the Town of Gibsons, we have a sustainable municipal water supply that is separate from the regional district. We extensively monitor it and have mapped our aquifer to confirm it can sustain the growth anticipated in our Official Community Plan. Now, though, our community is rightfully concerned that we will be increasingly relied on to supply water to the entire Sunshine Coast, as we did during the emergency last summer.

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"Nature is our most valuable asset"

There is no shortage of supply and storage projects that the SCRD, shíshálh Nation, and District of Sechelt are pursuing, but the most immediate opportunities are mired in administrative and operational delays that are severely aggravating in the context of a drinking water emergency.

Speaking of the project management delays, the SCRD has been ardently pursuing metering all users of regional water for many years, but the installation contractor will not be able to complete metering for the District of Sechelt until late 2024. This is an example of the kind of challenge we are constantly up against on the Sunshine Coast due to our relative isolation (via ferry) limiting the contracting/labour market, which is further compounded by the lack of housing for local as well as itinerant workers.

And speaking of our labour challenges, only four days ago I heard from an essential healthcare worker who recently relocated to the Sunshine Coast to help address the opioid crisis (this is the kind of worker we desperately need—she even found housing!) who has already been considering leaving due to water anxiety. Our annual water restrictions have only just begun and many Coast residents are genuinely stressed by the prospect of our community running out of water this summer.

My primary reason for writing you is to share with you this significant mental health and social phenomenon that has become absolutely real in our community, because it does not show up in our water licence applications or technical reports.

In contrast to the opening of this letter, it is becoming harder for our residents to enjoy summer life here on the Sunshine Coast. I can no longer remember the last time I was able to engage in simple small talk with a neighbour about sunny summer weather without the qualification of being worried we won't get enough rain. Despite our relatively sustainable situation in Gibsons, residents in our Town are just as worried about our neighbours and Coast as a whole.

As I also mentioned earlier, our hard-working public servants are especially behind the eight ball. Every day they are juggling short, mid-, and long-term solutions, so many that they are struggling to prioritize. Although regional water is unquestionably the responsibility of the SCRD, the administrations of the Town of Gibsons, District of Sechelt and notably now the shíshálh Nation have also now taken the emergency on as an overwhelming segment of our workplans and headspace, on a daily basis.

Yet, we elected officials are especially concerned about the anxiety and workloads of our staff, and the high risk we'd face of not being able to replace any more key staff members who choose to leave or need to take leave, perhaps at the height of a drought (and certainly during a housing crisis). Tomorrow it will be June 1 and they deserve some certainty about what the provincial parameters will be this summer.

That said, we do appreciate the State of Local Emergency support that was extended to the Sunshine Coast last summer/fall. Currently, the provincial government could help even more this coming summer, without a cent of funding, to significantly address the mounting water anxiety on the Sunshine Coast and to support sound, sustainable planning in regional water:

1. Immediately approve the SCRD's scientifically supported and monitored request to amend the Environmental Flow Needs for Chapman Creek.
2. Immediately approve the finalization of the water licence to allow the SCRD to initiate Church Road Well.

3. Immediately approve the SCRD's request to use the Chapman and Edwards Lake siphon systems in 2023 and 2024 to increase community water supply during Stage 4 water conservation regulations, if required.

We fully understand that these are not political decisions. We do recognize, though, that these are all scientifically sound applications and that due to our recent experiences with climate emergency, they need to be expedited—which is a very critical and desperately needed political decision.

It isn't appropriate, for example, to wait for the bureaucratic timelines of other agencies such as the Department of Fisheries and Oceans to make decisions about our local creek—by all means, let's hear their input into the notion of reducing EFN in June and July when there are essentially no salmon entering Chapman Creek, but they're going to need to recognize that this is an emergency and we need their input in a matter of days, not weeks (especially considering that it is already June).

The new Chief and Council of the shishálh Nation have been tremendously collaborative, and will no doubt be willing to rapidly and scientifically consider EFN reduction (which is closely associated to their position of non-opposition to the siphons) if the provincial government takes political leadership in expediting these processes for a community in water anxiety and crisis.

The Town of Gibsons is taking the rare and urgent step of writing the Premier, seven Ministers and our own MLA regarding our neighbours' water emergency because we are deeply experiencing substantial climate anxiety in our region of being unsure we will have drinking water by the end of the summer. It is highly likely that other BC communities will similarly be consumed by droughts and wildfires, but in those cases, we can't predict where yet.

We can reasonably predict however, that the Sunshine Coast regional water system will once again be under severe stress and this necessitates the pre-emptive actions in early June of approving the reduction in EFN, the activation of the Church Road Well, and the continuation of the Chapman and Edwards siphons. Please make this an immediate priority to expedite these applications.

Yours truly,

Silas White
Mayor of Gibsons

Cc Honourable Nathan Cullen
Minister of Land, Water, and Resource Stewardship

Honourable Bruce Ralston
Minister of Forests

Honourable George Heyman
Minister of Environment and Climate Change Strategy

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"Nature is our most valuable asset"

Honourable Bowinn Ma
Minister of Emergency Management and Climate Readiness

Honourable Anne Kang
Minister of Municipal Affairs

Honourable Murray Rankin
Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation

Honourable Josie Osborne
Minister of Energy, Mines, and Low Carbon Innovation

Nicholas Simons
Government Caucus Chair

Lenora Joe
shíshálh Nation Chief

Khelsilem
Squamish Nation Chair

Leonard Lee
SCRD Board Chair

John Henderson
District of Sechelt Mayor