

Salt Spring News

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News

Treatment of subdivision water Rainbow Grove residents looking for solution to arsenic contaminated water

by Michelle Grant

In a follow-up to last week's article, Unfit to drink: Who's to blame?, developer Mel Topping met with the Barnacle to provide an update to the water crisis at Rainbow Grove. Seven wells in the subdivision do not provide potable water. In many the mineral and arsenic content exceeds Canada's guidelines for drinking water.

When asked what was being done to resolve the situation Topping said, "One water treatment system was installed on [September 25] and water tests have been done on two others." He said the developers plan to deal with each property individually and that they had started on the well with the worst water, one which in 1997 exceeded the safety standards for arsenic content by 120 times and the fluoride content by five times.

Topping added, "We're a little bit behind but we will be fixing another shortly."

Topping refused to give the name of the expert hired to treat the water or provide any indication of the type of treatment system installed. He also refused to say under which of his capacities %o¥ädeveloper or realtor%o¥äthe work was being conducted.

The Barnacle has learned that Topping has hired Dale McInnis of Van Isle Water Services in Victoria to treat the water in Rainbow Grove. When contacted McInnis said, "Any equipment that has been installed has been site specific. I am confident the water [from the treated well] will now meet the Canadian Safety Drinking Water Standards."

Explaining that each well is different, McInnis refused to disclose what type of system had been installed or which government certified labs he uses for water tests. McInnis said the water treatment systems being installed will not treat all water entering the homes in Rainbow Grove.

"It would be cost prohibitive to remove the chemicals for the entire household. What we are doing is ensuring there is sufficient potable water for the householder's needs," said McInnis. He added, "It is my view that the follow-up tests should be conducted by the health department."

Topping co-developed the property with Parks,

O'Connor, Parks Ltd. When asked about the recently installed treatment system, Gerry Parks said, "Mel asked if I would contribute to the treatment system and I said 'Yes'." Saying he wants the situation to be resolved satisfactorily for the residents, Parks said, "We expect this problem to be fixed."

Jean Stewart, resident in Rainbow Grove, also wants the problem fixed. She said, "the best [real estate] deal you'll ever get" has turned into her worst nightmare.

"It blows my mind that this whole thing has occurred," said Stewart whose water tested 13 times higher than the safety standard for arsenic. Describing her water as having no smell, bad taste or discolouration to warn of its toxic content, Stewart said the discovery that her water was not potable came as a shock. "Since I found out about the 1997 report, I haven't had one worry-free day."

Stewart worries that her investment and security for the future is gone. "If I had known about the contamination, I would not have bought here. I don't want this issue to be hushed up or glossed over. Some people think arsenic is not a big deal. I tell them you're missing the point. The real point is the [Groundwater Hydrogeology Report] had been around for three years but none of the prospective buyers were made aware of it."

Stewart wants to know who is responsible. "I refuse to accept that this fell through the cracks of the Islands Trust and the Ministry of

Transportation and Highways (MOTH). We're talking about our health. [The arsenic] could kill us. Based on the information given to me to date of the involvement of the Islands Trust and the MOTH, the body responsible for approving the sub-division, it almost appears to be criminal negligence."

Another player in the unfolding drama of Rainbow Grove is the CRD Building Inspection Office. In order to obtain a building permit, the owner of the property must show that potable water is provided. According to Dick Stubbs, Senior Building Inspector for Salt Spring, in the case of the homes in the Rainbow Grove subdivision, it appears proof was requested and proof was given. How extensive the proof was remains to be clarified.

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