Notes from the Meeting of the Lakelse Lake, Jackpine Flats Septic System Management Program Working Group held Wednesday, Aug. 1, 2012, in the Regional District of Kitimat-Stikine Board Room, 300 - 4545 Lazelle Avenue, Terrace, BC commencing at 11:00 am

In Attendance

Working Group Members

Terry Brown, Lakelse Lake Advisory Planning Commission (1 pm)
Gordon Gillam, Lakelse Lake Community Association
Dave Materi, Lakelse Lake Community Association & DL 6263 Residents

Agency Representatives

Azreer Gill, Public Health Inspector, Northern Health Authority

Regional District Representatives

Doug McLeod, Regional District of Kitimat-Stikine (RDKS) Electoral Area C Director
Diane Penner, Alternate Electoral Area C Director (until 1pm)
Roger Tooms, RDKS Manager of Works & Services
Ted Pellegrino, RDKS Planner & Meeting Recorder
Margaret Kujat, RDKS Working Group Assistant

Others

No others were in attendance

1. Introduction

This is the Fifth (5th) meeting of the Working Group (WG).

The Meeting commenced at 11:05 am. In the absence of Linda Zurkirchen, Project Consultant with Cambria Gordon, Margaret Kujat served as Chair for the meeting. The WG determined to accept Margaret as Chair for this meeting. Margaret welcomed those in attendance.

2. Notes of the Meeting held July 11, 2012

Ted explained that the draft minutes were circulated earlier in the week to the WG for review and comment. Ted spoke to the change requested by John Jensen regarding his suggestion on public consultation for developing a septic tank management program. Ted added that a copy of the revised notes of meeting was subsequently re-sent to the WG for further review. The WG determined that the notes of the meeting on July 11, 2012 be accepted as presented.

3. Discussion Paper No. 4 -
   Estimated Costs of Operating a Septic System Management Program

Roger led the discussion on the above referenced report. The report dated September 15, 2007 is from the RDKS Lakelse Lake Jackpine Flats Liquid Waste Management Plan (LWMP).
Roger noted that this report which has been re-sent to the WG, was initially circulated to the WG when the WG was initially formed back in March 2012. He added that while the report and costs identified are some 5 years old, they represent a reasonable order of magnitude cost of the various program options. Roger noted that the components presented in the report including education, water monitoring of surface water at the lake and groundwater for Jackpine Flats and septic system maintenance remain valid today.

The two types of programs presented in the report were discussed. Roger noted that the annual estimated cost of $125 per household was based on septic tank pump-out at 3-year intervals. He added that at today’s cost this could be adjusted to $150 per year.

4. Septic System Permits

Ted presented the report to the WG regarding ‘Record of Sewage System Permit’. Concerns presented in the report were discussed by the WG. The WG commented on the lack of site specific information provided in the copy of the permit that is sent to the RDKS. The extremely fast percolation rates noted in permits issued for properties in Jackpine Flats was noted. Fast percolation is a problem in course/boulder soil conditions. This is a concern because with fast percolation rates there is a high risk of insufficient treatment in the soils potentially resulting in untreated sewage contacting the groundwater and adversely affecting (contaminating) potable water sources/wells.

Roger noted that the permits lack key information useful in determining potential impacts of the septic system on the environment and adjacent development. Roger spoke to the absence of relevant information on the site drawing including setbacks from property lines, where the property and neighbouring property obtaining their potable water, whether it’s from the lake or other surface source like a creek or a well. Roger added that these factors are important in determining not only if the system is functioning properly but also potential impacts to the environment and potable water supply.

Azreer asked if this RDKS was involved in any aspect of permitting septic system through the building permit process. Roger responded that the RDKS regulated buildings and structures but that onsite septic systems were the domain of the Province through the Sewerage System Regulations.

5. Northern Health Presentation

Azreer addressed the WG. He noted that at a previous meeting the WG presented some questions regarding the role of the NHA with regulating septic systems.

Azreer stated that the role of NHA Inspectors has been largely withdrawn and the regulations are performance based on the part of the ROWP. NHA receives ‘filings’ from the ROWP when a new system or repair is undertaken. The ROWP is required to follow the Sewerage System Standard practice Manual. He described the authorization of the ROWP and that they are regulated by their association (ASTTBC). Azreer also described the different levels of certification that the ROWP can obtain ranging from installers to designers of different types of septic systems from a basic type one to a more involved and specialized type three. Other questions presented at previous WG meetings addressed by Azreer include as follows.
When is a septic system required and when can a property have only an outhouse

Azreer explained that there are no legislation/regulations regarding the use of an outhouse as a method of onsite septic disposal. He added that NHA has guidelines for outhouses that property owners should follow when developing an outhouse on their property. He noted that generally an outhouse is not an option when the dwelling has running water. If the house has water under pressure then a septic system with ROWP involvement is required.

Septic Savvy Course

Azreer provided an update on the course that NHA is developing. He noted that the course should be in draft form and available for an internal review by the end of August or early September. He described that the course will use a variety of tools such as video and website access as delivery methods.

Roger reconfirmed the RDKS’s commitment to help facilitate the course.

Doug asked about the role and responsibilities of NHA in ensuring that septic systems once installed are being maintained and functioning properly. Azreer noted that the NHA still has enforcement capability for failing systems but they have been directed to respond only if there is clear evidence that a system is failing and causing a human health concern or issue.

Roger added that in the RDKS’s experience, the Province does not appear to have any intentions to police or enforce septic system regulations. They are relying on the ROWP. He added that this became evident during development of the LWMP. He added that the LWMP has reinforced the necessity for the RDKS and NHA to work together and that a joint effort and participation is necessary to manage septic systems.

Gordon commented that if the message is that the Province is not enforcing their own regulations and leaving it up to the RDKS to do so (to do their job) it makes it very onerous for the RDKS.

Margaret asked why the NHA does not make a unilateral decision to enforce the regulations. Azreer responded that this is not what they have been directed to do.

Roger noted that the RDKS Board does have the option to lobby the Province to enforce their regulations. Roger provided a history of the legislative changes where septic system regulations were enacted with authority given to the ROWP. He added that in his opinion there have been some problems with the regulations and that the Province should do an audit/review to assess how the regulations have been working and where they have not worked. The Review could determine whether what the Province set out to accomplish through the regulations have been achieved and where there have been shortfalls.

6. WG Meeting Schedule

Roger reviewed the proposed meeting schedule. He noted that the proposed schedule is ambitious, however if the WG is to focus on the tasks at hand the proposed schedule can be accomplished. Roger noted that in his opinion, questions regardless of the subject matter should be encouraged and no one should be discouraged or prevented from asking a question or providing an opinion.
He added that in the interest of time (keeping meetings to a 3 hour max.) questions or issues that are not directly related to the topic/task will be set aside (noted and placed in the "parking lot"). At the end of the meeting, the questions can be raised and addressed with the option for WG members to remain for the discussion or leave if they have other commitments. Roger noted that the goal of the WG will be to provide a recommendation to the RDKS Board on what the management program will look like.

Gordon noted that the $125 annual fee providing pump-out every 3 years will be of concern to property owners. Roger responded that the cost would likely be $150 per year that would not only cover pump-out at intervals to be determined but also for other components of a program including continuing education, water monitoring and program administration. Roger noted that the septic pumping companies now charge approximately $125 for a pump-out; however the RDKS does not presently charge a disposal fee to dump the effluent at the landfill and this will likely change in the future.

Dave suggested that in looking at cost, there is a need to consider vacant lots that do not have a septic system requiring pump-out.

Margaret noted that the education component of a program is very important. Roger added that the draft program will have a component that will look at the cost recovery method.

The WG recessed the meeting at 12:10 pm for a lunch break.

Azreer left the meeting at 12:30 pm.

The Meeting resumed at 12:35 pm.

Dianne asked if other areas of the RDKS will have similar programs. Roger responded that in his view this will be a pilot project for other areas that can benefit from a similar program.

7. Review Conceptual Program

Roger reviewed the conceptual cleanout and maintenance program. He spoke to the RDKS survey of septic systems that was done in support of a Thornhill application to senior government for community sewer project funding. He indicated that the Province wants clear evidence of failure rates of at least 25% of the systems before they even consider funding a project. Further that they also want to see that the local government has undertaken a community survey/questionnaire. Roger offered to provide the WG with a copy of the questionnaire as an example. The questionnaire is a source of important information to learn about individual systems. Roger spoke to the operation of on-site septic systems and distribution fields and added that the survey can help tell a story of the system.

Dave asked how many surveys were received for the Thornhill project and were they relatively simple to complete. Roger responded less than 5% likely due to time constraints because of funding application deadlines and that the applications were relatively simple requiring some 10 to 15 minutes of a property owner’s time. The survey was also available for completion online on the RDKS website. Gordon noted that a survey is a good way to get the word out about the program and that information could also be sent to the Community Association. It was noted that early fall is a good time to conduct a survey and there may be a better response if residents were told the results would be used to support a grant application for community sewer.
Doug noted that a survey is a good way to engage the public.

Roger agreed that the fall months (October) is a good time to send out a survey. A copy of the one used for the Thornhill project will be sent to the WG as an example.

Roger led WG discussion on the review of the conceptual program options. It was noted that explaining the potential benefits (incentives) to the residents is important.

Diane left the meeting at 1pm.

Doug spoke to the recent newsletter/information package that was sent to property owners. Providing more information is supportable and would encourage voluntary participation. He continued stating that it’s important to tell people up front about potential services that will be implemented. He added that coming forward with statements about inspection and cleanout programs does not relay the entire message that this could turn into a longer term service. They should be told what the program and the service will look like. Asking for feedback from the public will get more people on board if they think it’s a good idea. Doug noted that we must listen to the people that will be affected.

Roger stated that the survey could be discussed at the next meeting. He added that perhaps the next newsletter could prompt people to respond to the survey. Further that it could be used to get people’s opinion on whether they would prefer Option 1 or Option 2. Roger noted that this issue will encounter some struggles and is likely to become contentious and the WG should be prepared accordingly.

Roger noted that perhaps the communication plan component of the program development slated to be discussed at the October 24 meeting should be moved forward. The WG agreed and Gordon indicated that he will speak with the Community Association president Margaret Friry to keep her informed.

The WG discussed frequency of septic tank pump-outs. Roger noted that proper frequency will depend on the age and size of the tank. He added that in a worst case scenario, a tank may not have been pumped in 10-15 years, the lines are plugged and a detailed investigation of the system is necessary.

Roger spoke to the Thornhill example where he undertook detailed investigations of septic systems particularly the Copper Mountain neighborhood with very small lots and most of the lot area covered with buildings leaving very little area for a field and none for a new/backup field. He explained that he has researched alternatives to distribution field and filtration systems. Roger described some of the alternatives that are now apparently suitable and may be affordable to property owners. He emphasized that affordability is very important in bringing systems into a higher level of compliance.

Doug indicated that NHA needs to take a more active role with inspections and monitoring systems. Problems need to be defined so that people can work towards a solution.

8. New Items and Next Meeting

Working towards preparing a property owner survey needs to be a priority with the intention of sending it to property owners in October.
The RDKS should send an email to NHA offering to participate in the review of the septic savvy course.

The times for subsequent meetings was discussed. The WG decided that a start time of 9 am to approximately 12 noon would work better as that would give the WG members the remainder of the afternoon. The WG decided that future meetings will be from 9 am to 12 pm.

Dave stated that a company by the name of Triple H Bobcat Service has received certification as an ROWP which is good for the area given that there are few ROWP’s. It was suggested that there may be some benefit for a RDKS staff person to become certified as an ROWP.

Roger responded that a staff person could become certified although the intention would not be to compete with the private businesses/ROWP. He added that it would be for more involvement on system design and what technologies/methods could be used to make systems function properly while saving property owners money in bringing them into a higher level of compliance. He added that simple things that may not be in their practice manual now like bringing in some soil with field construction in Jackpine Flats could help considerably with slowing down the fast percolation rates. Further that the RDKS can develop bylaws with innovative design criteria that are not presently allowed/recognized particularly since the Provincial regulations appear to be a one size fits all approach. System design should be flexible to consider the area where it will be installed.

Doug agreed that there is some benefit in RDKS staff obtaining certification as an ROWP.

Administration will obtain information for the WG about ROWP certification for the next meeting.

It was determined that the next meeting date will be on Wednesday September 5, 2012 commencing at 9 am in the Regional District office.

Ted will confirm the meeting date.

9. Adjournment

Margaret thanked everyone for attending. The meeting ended at 2 pm.

NOTE:

Some WG members remained to further discuss general parked items which did not relate to the work plan identified for this meeting.