



Citoyens pour
la protection
de la Gatineau

Position regarding the septic waste treatment challenge in the MRC des Collines de l'Outaouais

The Problem

- Since December 2010, the seven municipalities within the MRC des Collines de l'Outaouais have been prevented from hauling septage to the City of Gatineau for treatment. Septage is currently being hauled greater distances to other facilities, at an increased cost to individual households.
- In November 2009, the MRC hired engineering firm CIMA+ to design an aerated lagoon treatment plant to be sited at one of two locations provided by the MRC and to service the 7 municipalities of the MRC. The MRC accepted CIMA+ recommendations to adopt the following technology¹ to treat regional septage:
 - a rotating press to dewater the sludge and
 - an aerated lagoon to treat the liquid effluent which will be discharged into the Gatineau River.
- The public was not properly consulted or involved in the planning process and now they have a range of serious concerns with the proposed solution and are being denied access to public documents that detail critical history and investigations relating to the regional septage problem.
- The Mayors of the MRC claim there is an urgent need to build the proposed facility and on this basis have refused to take the time necessary to investigate alternative solutions that will protect the Gatineau River from pollution, despite the following community concerns:

¹ This was the same technology that CIMA+ recommended and implemented in Kazabazua – a facility that has failed repeatedly to meet phosphorus emission standards.

Community Concerns

1. The proposed septage treatment facility will pollute the Gatineau River², particularly during peak recreational season when the water levels are at the annual low³.
2. Septage to be treated at the proposed treatment plant contains much more than human waste. It is a toxic cocktail that contains pathogenic micro-organisms, viruses, toxic chemicals used in our homes and any compound that has ever gone down a drain, including:
 - endocrine disruptors such as estrogen and a host of estrogen emulators that cause male fish to grow ovaries
 - pharmaceuticals such as paracetamol, ibuprofen and antibiotics
 - toxic metals such as cadmium, lead, mercury, silver and zinc,
 - synthetic organic chemicals such as brominated flame retardants, dioxins and PCBs
3. These chemicals carry a heavy and prolonged ecological toll when released into a freshwater ecosystem such as the Gatineau River. Many of them are not broken down in nature and are gradually concentrated to deadly levels as they make their way up the food chain. Studies on plants, mussels and fish have shown that many of these substances accumulate to significant concentrations in tissues.

The river is used as a drinking water source by many people downstream from the proposed discharge site.

4. The process to select potential sites for the facility was questionable; both proposed sites are located in Farrellton at the northern extreme of the MRC territory; one of these sites was preselected without objective criteria in March 2009, was removed from the list of sites in January 2010, and reappeared as one of the two final sites in February 2011.
5. The plan does not address the residual dewatered sludge, which the MRC plans to ship outside the region for treatment. Six possible locations were mentioned for the treatment of the sludge in the first CIMA report, ranging in distance from 119 km (Moose Creek) to 503 km (St Henri de Levis) from the Farrellton site. No cost estimates for trucking the sludge have been provided for this important step in the treatment process. Similarly, no estimates have been provided for the frequency of trucks travelling between the proposed regional septage facility and the unknown destination

² Even though it may theoretically meet Provincial Effluent Objectives for a few pollutants, the effluent will still pollute the river with other chemicals which are not subject to provincial regulation.

³ The consultants have used average flows to determine their “dilution factor”, ignoring the fact that the river dips to annual low flows in summer and early fall when most people are swimming, drinking and fishing in the river.

for the sludge. The community wants to minimize the costs and carbon footprint of trucking the dewatered sludge and the level of increased traffic on already dangerous roads, and to ensure that its sludge is not simply trucked away to pollute another community.

6. The site selection process was questionable and based on population distribution patterns and not the transportation corridors in the MRC. A thorough investigation of alternative sites throughout the entire MRC des Collines was not undertaken.
7. After public pressure, the MRC asked CIMA+ to investigate alternative technologies. However, CIMA+ has more extensive experience with their proposed lagoon technology and they are not commercially motivated to look at the best practices and alternative technologies used in other jurisdictions.
9. No government agency is considering the effects of cumulative pollutant loading on the Gatineau River. There is no data to support the claims of the MRC Mayors that the river can handle additional septage effluent without jeopardizing the health of our region's most important resource.
10. The agricultural community has made extensive and costly efforts which are enforced by the CPTAQ and MAPAQ to ensure the protection of freshwater resources against pollution from manure and livestock waste. The risks associated with septic waste are considerably higher and are being minimized.
11. Land zoned for agriculture is being considered for industrial purposes.
12. The municipality of Pontiac has indicated that it will expand its own wastewater treatment plant to treat their septage and therefore will not use the proposed regional facility. CIMA+ calculations for the proposed regional treatment facility are based on data that include Pontiac; important assumptions underlying to the plan are therefore flawed.
13. The MRC does not have a good understanding of its current and future needs for wastewater and septage treatment. It has no information on the state and effectiveness of the existing primary wastewater treatment facilities in the municipalities within the MRC. In addition, there is rapid growth in many of the municipalities; both Chelsea and Masham are considering expanding their wastewater infrastructure and will therefore have fewer homes using septic tanks in the future.
14. The original request for proposals (Appel d' Offre) indicates that the successful contractor should take into account other sources of septage from both municipalities outside the MRC and from commercial private sector processes (pulp and paper industry). It is stated that the MRC is interested in using the plant to process septage from outside the MRC, using the Gatineau River as the receiving waters for the polluted effluent. Our communities are concerned that the proposed regional facility will be used for processing waste from outside our region.

What can the Province do?

Put an immediate stop to the proposed project until the MRC can produce a comprehensive plan that identifies present and future needs for wastewater and septage management in the MRC and assesses alternative technologies and sustainable solutions that will protect our water assets for future generations.

The Québec Water Policy (2002) sets forth a number of excellent undertakings aimed at improving the quality of water intended for human consumption and at preserving aquatic ecosystems, including:

1. A requirement for intervention plans⁴ before infrastructure grants are awarded
2. Support for greater grassroots involvement in water management decisions
3. Support for municipalities to inspect septic systems for isolated dwellings

The Province has an important responsibility to protect freshwater. To help protect the ecological integrity of the Gatineau River, we ask the Province to:

- Monitor⁵, collect and analyze water quality data for the Gatineau River
- Determine the total loading of key pollutants⁶ that are released annually into the Gatineau River from many sources (treatment facilities, septic systems, agriculture, stormwater runoff, etc.)
- Determine precautionary Effluent Discharge Objectives for the MRC Septage Facility based on the Gatineau River's seasonal low flow, and taking into consideration the following:
 - landowners take drinking water from the river
 - the municipality of Chelsea may draw drinking water from the river in the future
 - people swim and paddle in the river
 - people eat fish from the river
 - several species at risk live in the river
 - the community would like to preserve and improve the water quality of the Gatineau River for future generations

⁴ The Province recognizes the need for municipalities and regional governments to create an "intervention plan"; an assessment of their total water and wastewater infrastructure needs for the present and future. Beginning in 2007, the government will require that any application for financial assistance for infrastructure projects be supported by a prioritization of the projects carried out on the basis of the intervention plan.

⁵ A robust monitoring plan that is year-round and tests for more than the recreational water quality of the river.

⁶ Phosphorus, Nitrogen, Ammonia, Sulphur, Zinc, Mercury, Cadmium, Lead, Total Suspended Solids, COD, BOD, pesticides, pharmaceuticals, endocrine disruptors.

- Provide the MRC with guidance⁷ to help them find the best solution to their septage and wastewater problems.
- Support the City of Gatineau to upgrade their wastewater treatment facility and ensure capacity to treat septage from the surrounding region.

Requests at the MRC level

- New eyes on the project: a feasibility study to determine the best solution⁸ to treat septage waste (including sludge from de-watered septage and wastewater lagoons).
- Explore and evaluate the option of finding a short-term solution until the City of Gatineau's treatment facility is upgraded and can once again accept septage from our region.⁹
- Form an inclusive committee to consult with moving forward. The committee should include independent experts and representatives from local and regional interest groups. Transparency around decision-making will improve trust and will likely result in an affordable solution that our region has confidence in.

Future considerations at the watershed level

- MRC wide mandatory inspections of household and business septic systems;¹⁰
- Collective action from all the municipalities within the Gatineau River Watershed to take every available step to protect the water quality and ecological integrity of the Gatineau River;¹¹
- Water quality monitoring¹² and annual reporting to the municipalities and public regarding the health of the river.

⁷ Help could come in the form of connecting the MRC with other municipalities that are working to solve septage issues, or those that have found solutions, so that they can share information regarding feasibility and alternative technologies.

⁸ The best solution must consider impact on the environment first, and economic feasibility second.

⁹ We believe the technology, expertise and monitoring at the Gatineau plant will surpass what our rural communities can afford.

¹⁰ Inspections are *better* than mandatory pump-outs as it helps to solve problems such as failing systems, intentional holes punched in tanks, etc. Pump-outs are not always necessary every two or three years and could be wasteful.

¹¹ This includes treating all point source waste to a high level, enforcing shoreline and floodplain alteration by-laws, protecting wetlands, to name only a few actions.

¹² A robust monitoring plan that is year-round and tests for more than the recreational water quality of the river.

Conclusion

We believe the provincial government should be playing a bigger role to help guide the MRC des Collines de l'Outaouais with the technical and complicated decisions it faces. These decisions will have serious long-term impacts on the water quality of the Gatineau River if mismanaged. Presently, Ottawa Riverkeeper, local community groups and individual citizens are working without pay to bring this information to the MRC, often too late into the process.

The sense of urgency as stated by the Mayors of the MRC is self-declared. In response to the City of Gatineau's decision to refuse septic waste from households in the MRC, septage haulers are now hauling septage to other facilities outside of the MRC (at the expense of the individual taxpayers). This short-term solution will permit the identification of the best solution for the MRC. The MRC could have acted much earlier on this file as they knew this day was coming. Given the importance of this issue that has long-term implications for our region, we should take the time now to get it right.

We fully support our municipalities in their search to find an effective and sustainable solution to our waste problems, but believe that a false sense of urgency should not be a reason for rushing such an important decision with such far-reaching consequences.

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