

Commentary

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Paul Rockley
PUBLISHER
prockley@greatwest.ca

NEWSROOM

John Barlow
ASSISTANT PUBLISHER/EDITOR
jbarlow@okotoks.greatwest.ca

Bruce Campbell
SPORTS EDITOR
bcampbell@okotoks.greatwest.ca

Darlene Casten
REPORTER
dcasten@okotoks.greatwest.ca

Blair Braitenbach
REPORTER
bbraitenbach@okotoks.greatwest.ca

Don Patterson
REPORTER
dpatterson@okotoks.greatwest.ca

Tamara Neely
REPORTER
tneely@okotoks.greatwest.ca

Newsroom e-mail:
westernwheel@okotoks.greatwest.ca

ADVERTISING

Jackie Moore
SALES MANAGER

Tanya Hinchelwood
SALES REPRESENTATIVE

Advertising e-mail:
advertising@okotoks.greatwest.ca

PRODUCTION

Tina Winistok
PRODUCTION MANAGER

Production e-mail:
production@okotoks.greatwest.ca

ADMINISTRATION

Sandy Manske
OFFICE MANAGER
smanske@okotoks.greatwest.ca

CLASSIFIEDS

classifieds@okotoks.greatwest.ca

9 McRAE STREET, BAG 9,
OKOTOKS, ALBERTA T1S 2A2

Phone: 938-6397
Fax: 938-2518

www.westernwheel.com

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EDITORIAL

Cap served purpose, now time to move on

It was a romantic ideal 10 years ago, but the mood has changed and it is time to loosen the grip on the unrealistic vision of a population cap in Okotoks.

The Town of Okotoks completed a series of open houses last week trying to solicit feedback from residents on the future of the population cap — should it stay or should it go? Feedback from the residents was divided as many said they believed eliminating the cap would mean the end of their small town while others felt the cap needed to be removed to facilitate controlled growth.

Ten years ago Okotoks council and administration were indeed visionary in developing the landmark Sustainable Okotoks policy and one part of that policy was instituting a 30,000 population cap.

However, the population cap was not and is not the essence of the Sustainable Okotoks vision.

The cornerstone of the policy was living within the carrying capacity of the Sheep River. It also provides guidance for the Town's economic future and outlines strategies to reduce its ecological footprint such as practices to reduce water usage, conserve energy and promote trend-setting environmentally sound development.

If the population cap is removed the Sustainable Okotoks policy will live on.

Rather than abandon the population cap an option would be to replace it with a water cap.

Many residents who oppose the removal of the population cap are concerned further development will drain the Sheep River.

At the open houses the Town tabled three options: One would be to keep the cap; second is to set a cap at 45,000 people and the Town would tie into a regional water system; the third scenario, the town would grow to 60,000 and Okotoks would connect to a regional water pipeline from Calgary.

Okotoks' growth would not put additional pressure on the Sheep River as the water would be coming from the Bow River. Which, in essence, is like robbing Peter to pay Paul. Whether it comes from the Bow or the Sheep, the water comes from the same source and that source is not infinite.

Therefore, regardless of where the water comes from Okotoks' focus should be on conserving that resource.

The Town has set a goal of 70 gallons per person per day and thus far it has not reached that goal.

If Okotokians are committed to protecting the water resources they should put their money where their mouths are. The Town could put a strict 70 gallon per person per day limit on water use in Okotoks and those who exceed the limits would pay a stiff fine. As part of that, council should look at technology that could be installed in each home to help homeowners meet the water use goal. How about a water gauge right by the kitchen sink that says exactly how much water a home has used that day?

Okotoks town council has to be realistic on this issue.

If council digs in its heels and sticks to the cap there is nothing to stop the MD of Foothills and the Calgary Regional Partnership (CRP) from pushing urban density development right up to Okotoks' borders. The partnership is anticipating 30,000 people will move to the Okotoks area in the next 60 or 70 years. With a population cap, those newcomers will be living in the MD of Foothills but in Okotoks' shadow using Town facilities and infrastructure. However, not one dime of their tax dollars will be used to maintain that infrastructure — the MD of Foothills will be collecting those dollars thank-you very much.

The only solution is to buy a 20-acre buffer encircling Okotoks so the Town can have its own island of bliss. That is not going to happen.

Okotoks would be much better served if it revamped its population cap and remained a participating member of the CRP where it would be in position to control its own destiny and influence other communities to follow its lead on environmental stewardship.

OPINION

Goodbye to little town



**Nancy
Ginzer**
COLUMNIST

In a move that will sweep 100 years of historical independence down the Sheep River, Okotoks is about to sign onto the Calgary Regional Partnership (CRP) plan. This signals the beginning of the end for a great little town.

In the CRP agreement, Calgary, with the consent of two-thirds of 17 participating municipalities, will hold superior veto. Excessive growth being the natural outcome of a growth-obsessed province, undesired mandates could be forced upon Okotoks against its will. Yet, the Town is prepared to ratify the agreement in June.

CRP representatives say whether Okotokians keep the status quo cap (30,000 population) is "up to them." This is disingenuous. By accepting the CRP mandate, the Town of Okotoks signs away its historic rights to autonomy. Even if citizens vote yes for the status quo in April's community survey, the CRP could legally override the cap.

Head cheerleader for growth is Mayor Bill McAlpine, who said, "People are going to be here... so we might as well face that fact and deal with it responsibly." The subtext of which is, "We're going to grow big whether you like it or not. You have to accept it."

But, is it "responsible" to sign onto an agreement that will so drastically change the quality of a town's life? To be sure, an expanded population would bring more tax revenues to Okotoks. However, as the experience of unhappy towns in Ontario have proven, it will also bring more crime, traffic, pollution, costly infrastructure, a fourth bureaucratic level of government, and higher taxes.

The right thing to do, of course, is to call a public plebiscite. By not doing so, the mayor shows disrespect for Canadian democracy.

Water is at the heart of this debate. With expansion, the Town will be forced to find other sources. Alternative water supplies such as aquifers are being considered, but chances are water will be piped from the already stressed Bow River at exorbitant cost. This is not a sustainable solution. Population growth, climate change and historical drought are predicted by top water scientists to cause a prairie crisis in water quantity and quality... with far-reaching implications in mere decades. Okotoks' contribution to the "crisis" only ups the ante.

In any case, who says growth is the only option? The provincial government? Big business? In progressively minded countries, the "everything must grow" philosophy is passé, while support for small, sustainable communities is increasing. Okotoks, a former leader in the green movement, is about to turn its back on its sustainable mandate. Why?

The mayor and the Minister of Sustainability Resource Development, Ted Morton, ought to visit the shrinking Columbia Icefields to remind themselves that Alberta — a semi-arid desert — has only two per cent of Canada's water. They should take off their blinders and read Jared Diamond's "Collapse," a book that describes how societies that deplete their resources for short-term fiscal gain and overpopulate their regions relative to the carrying capacity of the environment, fail. Look at the severe droughts in Australia, Africa, Spain, Argentina, USA, China. As former chair of the UN's Water Initiative, Bob Sandford said, "The Bow River basin is where Spain was 20 years ago, while Australia is where we might be 20 years from now."

Alarm bells are ringing everywhere. Except where money trumps common sense.

Once the CRP is ratified by Okotoks, say goodbye to your "sustainable" little town. Down the road, it's certain to become another faceless "blue blob" where crowding, water woes and top-down governance are what you'll get. Is this the quality of life you envision for your family's future?

*Nancy Ginzer is a member of
Citizens for a Sustainable
Okotoks*