

ROCKY MOUNTAIN OUTLOOK

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WATER, WATER,
EVERYWHERE, BUT
WHO KNOWS WHAT
TO THINK?

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EDITORIAL

Exshaw's hydrogeology too complex to dismiss

The situation for residents in the eastern edge of the hamlet of Exshaw must be frustrating right now.

Not only did they have to spend several weeks last spring pumping unprecedented amounts of groundwater from their basements and crawl spaces, while their streets were inundated with high water levels, but they also have to put up with a process that provided zero answers to their questions so far.

These residents of the MD of Bighorn made two very important observations in 2020. The first was that a major mountain creek flood mitigation project was completed in Exshaw Creek and the second was that the level of groundwater flooding in homes was higher than has been seen in over a generation.

The question ever since has been whether or not these two things are connected.

Council voted earlier in 2020 to invest \$40,000 for an independent consultant to produce a hydrogeologist report into the circumstances. Elected officials put four questions to McElhanney and when the final report was presented in November it became quite clear that it would take a lot more monitoring and modelling to be able to reach any conclusions.

Residents were denied a disaster recovery program application by the province due to the fact the water involved in this situation came from higher than normal snowpack levels. This is not in question, as the water had to come from somewhere.

But in his presentation to council in November, consultant Roger Towsley was clear that he could not answer the questions as it pertains to how the flood mitigation contributed to the situation.

"Further investigation is needed to really state with any certainty whether the engineered structure on Exshaw Creek had a significant impact on flooding due to the rising groundwater levels," Towsley said.

He also noted the complex situation this community is in with respect to where it is situated on the

landscape and the relationship of water bodies with the underground water flow systems. Exshaw sits smack dab in the middle of three mountain creeks (Exshaw, Jura and Heart), the Bow River, which flows past the community, and Lac des Arcs.

None of these things exist in isolation, but as a system that interacts with groundwater as well. While the report cannot prove a cause and effect relationship between the \$10.8 million in work done in Exshaw Creek and groundwater flooding, it also cannot rule it out.

So it becomes frustrating for those affected by this flooding event to constantly encounter the first point as a way to dismiss concerns they have that the second point could be true.

The report made recommendations around increased monitoring of the groundwater system, which would require a capital and operational investment, as well as modelling of the underground flows to better understand the situation. It was also suggested that the future of that part of the community will be one where basements and below grade structures are no longer permitted.

While council has yet to consider options to move forward with those recommendations for additional work, it has approved municipal property tax relief for residents who suffered a financial loss. It has also put \$10,000 into a process for residents to have their questions answered by the consultant.

That process, however, instead of being offered as a town hall format online, is being managed in a way that would provide vetted questions to Towsley to answer in a written report that will be later made public.

Given the frustration being felt by residents in east Exshaw about the situation and process, there may need to be an actual town hall eventually. Their thoughts and feelings on a situation that affects them directly needs to be heard in order for council to begin to regain trust within its own community.

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