

# Councillors agree to sewage leak study

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## Solutions can't come soon enough, staff told

BY JAKE RUPERT

Visibly frustrated councillors on the city's planning and environment committee approved spending \$400,000 yesterday to study the municipality's impact on the water quality of the Ottawa River.

Then they demonstrated their impatience by giving a directive to city staff that they expect a costed plan to stop polluting the river as soon as possible.

"Just to be clear," committee chairman Peter Hume said, "we and the public are looking for solutions, and you can't move fast enough on this."

On Monday, Mr. Hume met with federal Environment Minister and Ottawa West-Nepean MP John Baird, who pledged \$20 million to help the city stop polluting.

City public works officials proposed the study to figure out how badly the city was polluting the river and where the pollution is coming from. After that, they propose to offer costed solutions to lower the city's impact for council to choose

from next summer.

This is despite a federal environment ministry study last year that concluded that human feces from the Ontario side of the river is the main contaminant in the river.

Councillors told staff repeatedly that they, and residents, aren't looking for more studies but, rather, a frank assessment on how to stop pollution from going into the river and how much it was going to cost.

Dixon Weir, head of the city water and waste water department, said he understood the goal, but he added the price of fixing the environmental embarrassment was going to be high, and it would be wise to find out where most of the problem is coming from in order to get the best bang for the buck on infrastructure investments.

"You've done a good job lowering expectations," Mr. Hume said in response at one point.

Orléans Councillor Bob Monette, whose ward contains Petrie Island beach, which was contaminated by sewage in 2006, agreed with others on the committee.

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## River: sewage often spills

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"We have to be more aggressive on our approach," he said. "We should be putting no effluent into the river. We have to get serious about this."

But Mr. Weir repeated that the best thing to do is study the problem and come up with targeted responses, and with no other choice before them, the committee unanimously voted to proceed with the study. Water quality in the river shot to the public's attention in 2006 when the Petrie Island beach was closed for swimming more than it was open.

It turns out the downtown core of Ottawa is still on a combined sanitary and storm sewer system that routinely overflows into the river during rainstorms. In 2006, an overflow gate got stuck open and about 350 Olympic-sized swimming

pools' worth, almost a billion litres, of sewage spilled into the river at once.

A city staff member has already been fired for allegedly not reporting the spill and then lying about it, and several other investigations into the incident are under way, but the fact remains the city still routinely spills sewage into the river.

For instance, it has done so on at least three occasions already this year.

City staff say a new system being installed in the coming years is projected to lower the amount of overflow spillage by 65 per cent.

Deputy city manager of public works Richard Hewitt also said his department will prepare a report on an old plan to build an overflow tank downtown to hold the spillage until the city's sewage treatment plant can handle it. He estimated this would cost about \$100 million.