RE: Sept 7 Picton Gazette Opinion, p.6 – “Wellington Skeptics”

If Wellington Residents are skeptical, who can blame them?

It is rare for a public meeting on a topic as mundane as Water Infrastructure to draw a crowd, even more so on the Thursday evening leading up to the last long weekend of the summer. Yet over 400 Wellington residents showed up seeking information and clarity from Shire Hall in what became a proverbial exercise in pulling (factual) teeth.

Isn’t civic engagement a cornerstone of community building, let alone democracy? There may be some who believe in a paternalistic relationship between Shire Hall and constituents, but clearly Wellington residents do not, and, in our opinion, the dismissive tone of the recent Gazette editorial failed its readers.

Wellington residents are not opposed to the inevitable expansion of their community, nor are they fearful of growth. On the contrary, they welcome properly planned, sustainable, healthy, affordable and livable development. Furthermore, they recognize the need for it, and are eager for its many associated benefits.

The water system in Prince Edward County operates under a ‘user pay’ model. As such, water users are responsible for the costs of maintaining and running the existing system. The financing scheme for the proposed water infrastructure project depends largely on development fees, which will only materialize if the commercial and residential growth projections are accurate and actually come about. If these predictions and assumptions fall short or do not happen at all, PEC water users will ultimately be on the hook for the costs incurred in the construction, operation and maintenance of any new water infrastructure. In the event of such a worst case scenario, the financial burden would be entirely borne by water users for decades to come. Therefore it is completely reasonable for Wellington water users to question the rationale, forecasts, predictions, assumptions, numbers upon which the proposed water infrastructure project is predicated.

It should also be noted that County residents and others who have considerable real-world expertise in government finance, commercial development, municipal law, governance, and urban planning have red-flagged some of the assumptions Shire Hall has made to support its $100 - $150 million plan.

In other words, Shire Hall is relying on consultants who are representing what they *believe* the marketplace will do, while the above notedprofessionals (albeit a small sample but that’s easy to remedy) who *actually* routinely make such decisions are saying the consultants’ numbers are implausible and therefore Shire Hall’s financial model is vulnerable.

How is *that* not newsworthy??

This critical issue has clearly galvanized the community and Prince Edward County residents should be applauded for their engagement. If Shire Hall really believes this decision is too important for public engagement, and if they are so confident in their plan, perhaps they should consider having the entire municipal tax base assume financial responsibility for the project. After all, development requires water which in turn creates jobs, opportunities and economic growth that all PEC benefits from, so why not let all of PEC share in the investment --- and risk?

* Wellington Community Association