

Water, water not everywhere

A vision of regional needs only way to ensure best usage

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Providing water for the proposed regional shopping centre at Balzac, and the associated United Horsemen of Alberta racetrack, is the kind of dilemma which makes the case for a regional approach to planning and land service.

More important, it is the kind of signature development that challenges the provincial government with these fundamental questions: Water being a scarce resource, how should it be allocated, and when is the public interest best served by turning off the tap?

The regional question is perplexing.

Because the Balzac development is just outside the northern limits of the City of Calgary, the city -- quite properly -- has no obligation to supply it with water.

It was therefore no surprise the city took a pass when the M.D. of Rocky View pitched the idea last year. But, that means instead of building a three-kilometre waterline from a city hookup, Rocky View must build a 62-kilometre line from Acme, for \$40 million.

Who pays? Roughly \$32 million of that will be billed to the developers, but the M.D. qualifies for an \$8-million grant from Alberta Agriculture. That the interests of Calgary taxpayers are preserved is good. But ultimately, there's only one taxpayer.

How sensible is this, especially as the bulk of the shopping centre's trade is going to be from Calgary? About as sensible as the M.D.'s penchant for surrounding Calgary with low-density residential development, one might say. Where's Calgary to grow?

But, these are the kinds of things that go on when there's no regional vision. Of course, municipalities will pursue what they perceive as their best interests -- in Rocky View's case, an enhanced, non-residential tax base.

It just needs the water to make it happen. This brings the provincial government into the equation.

Rocky View's plan was to draw from the Bow River, through the local water co-operative. That plan fell apart in August, when the provincial government placed a moratorium on new water licences from the Bow, Oldman and South Saskatchewan rivers. Calgary has water to spare -- enough for more than twice its population -- but chose not to help out, so the M.D. applied to Alberta Environment for a licence to take water from the Red Deer River.

The M.D. hopes for early approval.

However, its application has proved controversial, especially in the City of Red Deer, anxious lest its future expansion be compromised. Meanwhile, Liberal opposition Leader Kevin Taft questions whether an approval would be in the spirit of the provincial Water for Life strategy. (Legalities appear to have been duly followed and Red Deer's capacity is not disputed. Premier Ed Stelmach has explicitly declined to interfere with the process).

Taft has raised a fair question.

Southern Alberta faces increased demands for water, even as doubts gather about the long-term dependability of supply. If the southern part of the South Saskatchewan watershed is tapped out, just how completely should those of its watersheds remaining be committed?

In this case, Rocky View and the developers have proceeded in good faith, according to the rules as they were written at the time of application. (Stelmach has since asked for them to be reviewed). Were the application to be arbitrarily denied, compensation would be in order.

Two things must happen.

First, when resources become scarce, southern Alberta municipalities should work together to divvy them up. The Calgary Regional Partnership, formed a few years ago to facilitate combined planning and service, looks like the right vehicle. Indeed, in June it will release its report on the feasibility of a regional water pipeline. It could hardly be more timely.

Second, the provincial government needs to decide what resources can be prudently allocated to southern Alberta municipalities.

It already knows how much water it has. It is also studying if and how it should be priced.

Now, it needs to decide how much growth this will allow. The Balzac request is the first, not the last. What can the watersheds stand?

On this, both levels of government must develop a shared understanding.

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