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Providing safe, clean water

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MNL helps municipalities make decisions on water services

The importance of safe drinking water was the topic of one of the many forums held for participants in the MNL symposium last week.



*Christy Janes photo
Campbellton Mayor Maisie Clark was one of the municipal representatives to address the MNL symposium.*

Kelly Vodden and MNL CEO Craig Pollett gave a presentation on how municipalities can make the most of the water services and the importance of having certified water operators.

Pollett said municipalities shouldn't think they are immune to a situation similar to what happened in Walkerton, Ont., where seven people died and 2,300 were made ill from an outbreak of E. coli in May 2000.

"It's been a big issue for a very long time and for many years we avoided talking about Walkerton," said Pollett.

He said given the state of a lot of drinking water systems in this province, MNL is concerned someone is going to get sick, or they already have and just don't realize why, because it's not tracked here.

"The health-care system doesn't check to see if the stomach bug you have came from the fact you drank bad water. MNL wants to look into testing for bad water," he said. "As your association, we think (municipalities) are at risk for being blamed for something that might

happen in the future. If it's not dealt with now, the results could be worse.”

Vodden shared some ways communities can make the most of their water services.

“We need to be vigilant in monitoring our drinking water. We are facing water challenges, and municipal leaders, councils, MNL, provincial and federal governments all have a role to play in addressing the issue,” Vodden said.

She focused on things municipalities can do to ensure their water drinking systems are being used to their fullest potential and said municipalities need to re-evaluate how they charge for water and sewer and what the cost of providing these services is.

Pollett reassured municipalities that MNL would work with them to make the best decisions for their towns.

“Rather than every town try to run numbers or get a consultant, it may be the kind of thing MNL can do collectively for different kinds of systems and different sizes of municipalities,” he said.

Vodden encouraged councils and administrators to maintain a level of knowledge about their infrastructure and operating costs. One way of doing this is to digitize a town's infrastructure maps. This would allow municipalities to identify where repairs have been completed and also serve as a backup in case paper maps are lost or destroyed.

Pollett suggested this could be a membership service MNL could provide to municipalities.

Vodden said municipalities should be aware of their high water users. She also posed the possibility of metering houses or sections of a town.

Source water monitoring was another priority she discussed.

“Communities aren't really doing the monitoring they are supposed to be for a protected water supply area,” Vodden said.

Pollett said, “While there is not much MNL can do directly with protecting source water, we can focus on education. If councils don't understand what is threatening their water supply, it's hard to monitor.”

He said MNL could help make source water monitoring as simple as possible for municipalities by offering check lists, education and training.

Vodden said municipalities can explore regional service sharing options and hire a regional certified water operator or equipment ,with more than one town co-operating.

Pollett said he was pleased to see the provincial government hiring three certified water operators available to work with clusters of communities, but he feels there needs to be a broader approach and suggested some municipalities may want to do pilot projects to hire a water operator.

MNL will engage a drinking water liaison who would be the go-to person for municipalities dealing with drinking water issues.

Campbellton Mayor Maisie Clark raised concerns about Campbellton's water operator.

Up until about two years ago, Campbellton had a certified water operator and two trained operators that worked with him.

When the certified operator left the community, Clark convinced the remaining operators, both in their 60s, to take the certification test for water operators.

When the men went to write the test, it was discovered they needed a copy of their Grade 8 transcript.

"Where does a 60-year-old man find his Grade 8 marks? The school is probably gone," Clark said.

The water operators weren't allowed to write the test because of the missing transcripts and therefore are currently not certified.

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