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## **Fighting against flow**

**Act now to clean up water, Halifax mayor warns  
Ottawa**

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If Halifax can do it, so can Ottawa.

In just five years, Halifax has gone from pouring almost 200 million litres of untreated raw sewage every day into its harbour to opening public beaches closed for more than 30 years because of high levels of E. coli.

Discussions about how to stop the flow of hundreds of billions of litres of untreated raw sewage into the Halifax Harbour every year began in 1996 just after Halifax amalgamated with several neighbouring municipalities.

### TREATMENT FACILITIES

It took another seven years to develop a plan and find the \$333 million it was going to take to build three large wastewater treatment facilities and begin to rebuild and separate an aging sewer network similar to Ottawa's that in some areas carries both raw sewage and storm water.

"We knew we had to do it," said Halifax Regional Municipality Mayor Peter Kelly. "For 60 years people had been saying it's time to clean up the harbour."

The historic body was so disgusting, filled with raw sewage that had been settling on its bottom for decades, that water quality was always far below acceptable levels. Bacterial contamination was widespread and the Halifax and Dartmouth waterfronts were in extremely poor condition "due to floatables and odour."

"We decided to take out the sludge, all of it," said Kelly.

On Aug. 2, HRM opened two beaches that had been closed since the 1970s and Kelly was one of hundreds to take the first dip in clean water in 30 years.

"It felt good," he said, adding you can now see the bottom of the harbour where it wasn't visible in the past because of the heavy contamination.

"There's no more smell. Just the smell of salt water."

Kelly strongly advises Ottawa to move quickly to stop the flow of raw sewage into the water before the cost becomes too prohibitive.

The HRM wanted to take action before the federal or provincial governments imposed strict regulations to eliminate the flow of raw sewage into the harbour or before any sewer disaster struck the municipality. So council came up with the Harbour Solutions Project.

They paid for more than two-thirds of the cost after charging residents a special tax on their water bill. The amount residents paid depended on their water consumption. The balance, about \$107 million, came from the other two levels of government. The annual operating cost is about \$6 million.

"We went through a lot of years of big dreams and no results," said Kelly. "But the public put the pressure on us."

The Halifax treatment facility was the first to come online with one in Dartmouth, just across the harbour, expected to be fired up next month. The third is located in Herring Cove, 15 km south of downtown Halifax, and will be open next year.

HRM spokesman James Campbell said as part of the project the city has started to separate its antiquated combined sewer system.

"Two years ago a large area of downtown Halifax underwent a separation project that saw areas have their storm and sanitary sewers separated," said Campbell.

### PREVENT BACKUPS

Like Ottawa, a separated sewer system is part of all new developments.

A combined system allows the sanitary sewer operation to provide capacity for storm water runoff when volumes are high, particularly during a rainstorm. When the system isn't accepting storm water, raw sewage from homes and businesses flows through the same system to a treatment plant. But when a combined system is subjected to heavy rainfall, both raw sewage and storm water flow through the same pipe and when levels are too high for the system to handle, rather than letting it back up onto city streets and into homes the mixture enters a bypass that overflows into a nearby waterway.



**Westboro Beach, which often reports high levels of E. coli, has been closed to swimming 20 times this summer. (JON WILLING/Sun Media)**

Federal Environment Minister and Ottawa West-Nepean MP John Baird likes what Halifax is doing and says all levels of government have to work together to combat raw sewage being emptied into Canadian waterways.

When Baird was appointed environment minister he wasn't aware raw sewage was still being dumped into water people use to drink. "I was stunned to learn it's not illegal to dump raw sewage into rivers and lakes," said Baird.