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Shelburne pushes back against phasing out free well-water tests

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Shelburne Town Council is joining forces to call on the provincial government to not phase out free well-water testing for private wells.

During their meeting on Monday (May 13), Shelburne Town Council addressed communications received from the Nottawasaga Valley Conservation Authority (NVCA) regarding Public Health Ontario's (PHO) proposal to discontinue free well-water testing on private wells.

?I would like us as the council to not only support the conservation authority but also support our neighbours within town. We want to push the Ontario government to not discontinue free testing of well-water. Its important in my mind that everybody should have their water tested, but if you start making them pay for it, likely they're just not going to. Having it as a free water testing is something that is more likely to be done on a regular basis and something I think that should be supported,? said Councillor Kyle Fegan, who is an appointed member of the 2023 NVCA Board of Directors.

Concerns around the discontinuation of the free well-water testing program have come from a recommendation in the provincial Auditor General's 2023 Value-for-Money Audit of Public Health Ontario (PHO), which was released in December.

The report recommended that the PHO and the Ministry of Health (MOH) move to implement a modernization plan within the next year. The modernization plan is similar to one proposed in 2017, which suggested shuttering six out of 11 provincial health labs and scaling down the types of testing publicly offered, including a gradual phase-out of free private well water testing.

Ontarians who get their drinking water from municipal sources are protected by the Clean Water Act and Safe Drinking Water Act, but residents on private wells don't have the same legislated protections and are responsible for monitoring their own drinking water.

Water quality tests conducted on private wells by PHO check for bacteria contaminations such as E. coli in order to prevent gastrointestinal illnesses from drinking water.

Fegan pointed to the May 2000 outbreak of E. coli in Walkerton, Ont., as a reason why Shelburne Council needs to support the NVCA in their advocacy to continue the private well water testing program free of charge.

An inquiry into the Walkerton E. coli outbreak, which resulted in the deaths of seven people and made over 2,000 people sick, found that privatization of municipal well water testing was a factor in the direct outbreak.

?Free well-water testing is a critically important public service and a vital public-health measure for rural residents across out watershed,? said Jonathan Scott, vice chair of the Nottawasaga Valley Conservation Authority. ?The NVCA board urges the provincial government to maintain free well-water testing. It's the right thing to do to ensure equitable access to safe drinking water.?

According to the NVAC, a large portion of residents in the Nottawasaga Watershed rely on private wells for drinking water.

A motion to support the NVCA in calling on the provincial government to not phase out the free well-water testing program was passed unanimously by Shelburne Town Council.