Update on interim phosphorus removal at Winnipeg's north end sewage treatment plant

News
LWF
February 10, 2021
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Measurable phosphorus reduction at Winnipeg's largest sewage treatment plant is one step closer to reality – a success made possible by committed citizens speaking up for change.

On Feb. 9, Winnipeg's Standing Policy Committee on Water and Waste, Riverbank Management and the Environment recommended funding for interim chemical phosphorus removal at the North End Water Pollution Control Centre (NEWPCC).

The committee decision comes as a follow-up to an October 2019 Winnipeg City Council motion which directed department staff to test interim phosphorus removal options, report back to the committee, and subsequently implement a phosphorus-removal solution within 14 months.

The capital infrastructure required to implement interim phosphorus removal at the NEWPCC is projected to cost $10.5 million. Ongoing operational costs will cost approximately $2.2 million per year. Preliminary projections show the interim solution could reduce phosphorus loads from NEWPCC by upwards of 23 per cent. Optimization of this technology would increase phosphorus reduction.

We fully support investment in interim phosphorus reduction as a feasible, cost-effective solution to reduce the NEWPCC's impact on Lake Winnipeg, and we commend city councillors for investing in concrete action that will have measurable results. However, two concerns remain:

Timeline: The implementation timeline presented on Feb. 9 is not consistent with City Council's previous commitment to implement interim phosphorus removal with 14 months, a timeline that should result in an operational system by April 2022. The public service report presented on Feb. 9 instead projects an implementation date of August 2023.

Lack of optimization through new biosolids capacity: Phosphorus reduction requires biosolids capacity. Currently, limited biosolids treatment capacity at the NEWPCC limits the performance of any interim solution, meaning that the 1 mg/L phosphorus limit set out in the NEWPCC's provincial operating licence cannot immediately be met.

But biosolids capacity limitations will be addressed when new facilities are built as part of Phase 2 of the larger NEWPCC upgrade project. This new biosolids facility must be designed and constructed to address existing constraints and maximize the effectiveness of any interim solution in place. The design phase of the new biosolids facility is expected to begin this year.

At Feb. 9's standing policy committee meeting, LWF Executive Director Alexis spoke up in support of interim phosphorus removal and expressed our concerns. (You can read her full statement on our "Resources for Citizens" web page.)

The motion was amended before it was approved. The committee directed city staff to work with stakeholders to optimize the interim solution to continue to lower the NEWPCC's phosphorus levels. While this amendment is well intentioned, it lacks any firm commitments to accelerate timelines or improve the performance of the interim solution.

What's next: The motion approved by the Standing Policy Committee will now be referred to Winnipeg's Executive Policy Committee on Feb. 17, and to City Council on Feb. 25.

How you can help: Over the past two years, citizen advocacy has successfully moved Winnipeg's sewage situation into the spotlight – and onto the agenda of local politicians. Help us continue this momentum by reaching out to your city councillor. Express your support for investment in phosphorus reduction at the NEWPCC, and your concerns about timeline and optimization.

Here's an example of an effective message you could send:

"I live in your ward and have been following the ongoing developments at City Hall related to reducing phosphorus from the North End Water Pollution Control Centre (NEWPCC). I regularly visit Lake Winnipeg, and have seen first-hand the algal blooms caused by excessive amounts of phosphorus from sources including undertreated city sewage.

I am pleased to learn that progress is finally underway on interim phosphorus removal at the NEWPCC. Approving funding for this project is a necessary investment that demonstrates leadership and a commitment to measurable action. Thank you for supporting this step.

However, I am concerned that the implementation timeline for these much-needed improvements is now projected for August 2023. This is more than a year later than the timeline previously agreed to by all members of City Council. To improve the health of Lake Winnipeg, we need accelerated solutions, not additional delays.

I also understand that implementing interim phosphorus removal will increase biosolids production, and that the NEWPCC currently lacks capacity to handle this. With work soon to begin on a new biosolids facility, an opportunity exists to proactively design this facility to handle increased biosolids production and achieve phosphorus compliance.

This is an issue that matters to me. I ask you to please keep pushing for accelerated implementation of interim phosphorus removal, and to ensure that Winnipeg's new biosolids facility is designed to address capacity challenges and comply with phosphorus limits.

I would appreciate it if you could reply to me.

Sincerely,

Your name"

Remember to customize your comment as much as possible, and aim to be clear and concise with your message.

Thank you to the many lake-lovers who have joined us in advocating for accelerated phosphorus reduction at NEWPCC. Your voices are being heard – and your efforts are having an impact.

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