

Metering water: An overdue necessity or an expensive and politically dicey move?

BY FRANK LUBA AND DAN FUMANO, THE PROVINCE SEPTEMBER 19, 2013

10

- [STORY](#)

- [PHOTOS \(1 \)](#)



Coquitlam Mayor Richard Stewart initially supported the idea of measuring water usage, but found the cost was ‘enormous.’

There is a clear and growing need for water meters, say the experts. Indeed, most cities in the developed world have universal metering.

B.C. lags well behind most of the rest of the country in terms of water metering, with less than 40 per cent of homes using a meter. Provinces such as Ontario, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia have more than double B.C.’s rate of metered households.

In B.C. the majority of homes still do not have meters, and at the municipal level, where the decision rests, it remains a thorny, difficult and often divisive issue.

It's possible that B.C. has been slower to introduce water meters because the region is so rich in the resource. But even in a rain-rich region like B.C., according to an internationally renowned water expert, "it's completely irresponsible that we don't meter water."

"I'm very adamant about it," said Hans Schreier, a UBC water expert with extensive international experience. He points to the example of Tofino, in the most rainfall-intensive area in B.C., which has run out of water in recent years.

Schreier said: "We meter everything else. We meter gas, electricity, everything else. I'm not talking about increasing cost, I'm just simply saying metering is an essential necessity so we can actually account for it."

Vancouver is one of the only big cities in the developed world without water metering, Schreier said.

"I think it's simply the Wild West attitude. If you look at the water laws we have in the west, (it's) first come, first served. The longer you let this go, the more controversial it becomes."

But, in Schreier's view, the only way for cities to manage this resource is to measure it.

"Some mayors are progressive and they do it. And some are not. Gibsons did it, West Vancouver did it. And (Vancouver) has their head in the sand," he said.

The Province took the issue to several B.C. mayors, asking their position on water meters. Many communities are slowly moving toward meters, while others said they were kept away by the prohibitive cost and public opposition. But a few communities, spread throughout the province, have fully embraced the metered model.

The Island region is ahead of the rest of the province.

All new construction in Nanaimo has to be metered, said Mayor John Ruttan.

The metres are paid for through development cost charges and he's hopeful the entire city will one day be metered.

"I think we have to realize that no two persons use the same amount of water," said Ruttan.

Even with metering, Nanaimo is heading toward a water crisis.

“Our engineers tell us (that) in 2020, demand will exceed supply,” said Ruttan.

Elsewhere on Vancouver Island, Victoria and Sidney have both been fully metered for years.

The City of Langley has used meters on all homes and businesses for several years.

“We love it,” said Mayor Ted Schaffer. “You pay for what you use.”

Meanwhile, the neighbouring Township of Langley does not use household meters, and every resident pays a flat rate.

In Kitimat, there’s no shortage of water and no water meters, said deputy mayor Edwin Empinado.

“It hasn’t come to council,” said Empinado, whose community filters water it draws from the Kitimat River.

Another community where water supply isn’t a problem is Granisle, where there are no meters, according to Mayor Linda McGuire.

“It’s irrelevant because we’re just such a small community,” she said of 350 residents that draw their water from massive Babine Lake.

There’s also the high cost of installing meters.

“It’s one more thing you’re dragging out of your taxpayers’ pockets,” said McGuire.

Money was also an issue in Coquitlam, where Mayor Richard Stewart initially supported the idea of residents paying for the amount of water they actually used.

“Unfortunately, the cost was enormous,” said Stewart of putting in meters.

He’s hopeful that conservation measures instead of meters will restrict water use in Metro Vancouver, which relies on water from the Capilano and Seymour reservoirs, with the Coquitlam reservoir being a resource shared with B.C. Hydro.

“As long as we manage it, we have the [water] capacity,” said Stewart.

Burnaby residents also pay a flat rate instead of relying on meters. In Surrey, all new construction in the past decade has required meters, but many residents still pay a flat rate, although the city encourages residents to voluntarily switch to meters.

Richmond has had success with their voluntary metering program.

During the past seven years, 70 per cent of residents have voluntarily converted to metering, and 87 per cent of those who made the change have seen their water bills decrease compared with the flat rate, said Richmond spokesman Ted Townsend.

Abbotsford has used universal water metering for residents and businesses for decades now, and during the past two years they've become one of the first jurisdictions in Canada to install smart water meters in every household.

Lions Bay is also part of Metro Vancouver, but the little village perched on the edge of Howe Sound draws its water from two giant concrete tanks and treats it with ultra-violet light.

There are no water meters in Lions Bay and Mayor Brenda Broughton said "we haven't really discussed it."

On the North Shore, West Vancouver has universal metering for residential buildings, while District of North Vancouver single-family homes pay a flat rate.

Water meters have been discussed in Vancouver and are part of Mayor Gregor Robertson's Greenest City initiative.

But currently, meters are required only in new homes, dual-family homes or homes that are being substantially renovated or rebuilt.

Lake Country in the Okanagan also requires meters on new construction and Mayor James Baker said his town of close to 12,000 is applying for grants to both the federal and provincial governments to retrofit metres to existing homes.

Water is a vital resource in the heavily agricultural region and meters can help conserve water.

"As a conservation means it's very important because people realize they don't have to use as much water," said Baker.

Elsewhere in the Okanagan, all residents supplied by the City of Kelowna water utility are on water meters, while nearby Kamloops is in the process of installing them, and Vernon has universal metering.

In Keremeos there's currently no discussion about installing meters, said Mayor Manfred Bauer. But Bauer said that back in his native Germany, he's seen first-hand how effective meters are in promoting conservation.