

# Water's precious, so treat it that way

## Gibsons: Community consumption went down, awareness came up after town introduced H2O charge

BY DAN FUMANO, THE PROVINCE SEPTEMBER 20, 2013

The residents of Gibsons should be proud of their water. It comes up out of the ground pure and untreated and was awarded "Best Drinking Water in the World" in the world's largest water-tasting competition.

But it's not free.

Last year, the Sunshine Coast town began charging 20 cents a litre for water from the outdoor tap at Well No. 1, which for years had provided its award-winning water for free to residents and tourists. The decision to charge, while controversial among residents not accustomed to paying at the pump, was part of a broader shift in Gibsons' water strategy, which has drawn recognition from experts as a successful example of a modern, progressive water management plan.

The broader plan includes a universal metering program for every residence and business in Gibsons, which was initiated in 2009 and is to be in complete operation by the end of this year.

About 75 per cent of the town's 4,500 residents rely on a groundwater source, while Upper Gibsons is supplied from the Sunshine Coast Regional District's treated surface water.

The metering program is credited with helping reduce overall water consumption in Gibsons by 36 per cent since 2009 - during a period when the population has been growing.

Dave Newman, the head of engineering for Gibsons, said metering is one of a number of initiatives in recent years that contributed to the "impressive drop in water consumption."

In addition to the metering, Gibsons replaced some water mains, made changes to distribution plans, and repaired a number of leaks.

The metering system has provided another advantage: Metering provides more information about water flow, which allows the municipality to identify and repair leaks in situations where water was previously wasted.

Newman said metering also provides a more fair billing system, and allows residents to save money if they cut back on water use.

"If someone decides they're going to have a big, green lawn and they're going to refill their pool three times a year, then they will be paying for that. Versus a little old lady who chooses to let her grass go brown. They're paying for what they're using, rather than everybody paying the same amount."

After the 20-cent-a litre charge was introduced in Gibsons, the public Well No. 1 saw a big decrease in consumption. In 2011, the year before they started charging, the monthly average consumption was 50,800 litres. For 2013 so far, it's down more than 80 per cent to 8,750 litres a month.

Ian Poole, director of finance, said that during the first two years of metered billing, the vast majority of residents saw their bills decrease from the years of a flat rate. Last year, they increased rates to make up for a deficit, and during the coming years, town hall will continue to tinker with the rates to find the correct amount needed to cover the cost of infrastructure, operations and maintenance. Poole said it makes sense to charge for water, "because it makes people aware of the precious resource that it is."

And others are taking note of Gibsons' progressive water stewardship strategy. The town was recently selected as a case study for an international conference at the University of Toronto that highlighted water innovation.

[dfumano@theprovince.com](mailto:dfumano@theprovince.com) [twitter.com/fumano](https://twitter.com/fumano)

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