

Walkerton... 20 years later

This week marks the 20th anniversary of the Walkerton water crisis. In this week's issue of the Herald-Times, we reflect on the horrific tragedy that made more than 2,300 people sick and resulted in seven people losing their lives.

'People were going to die from this'

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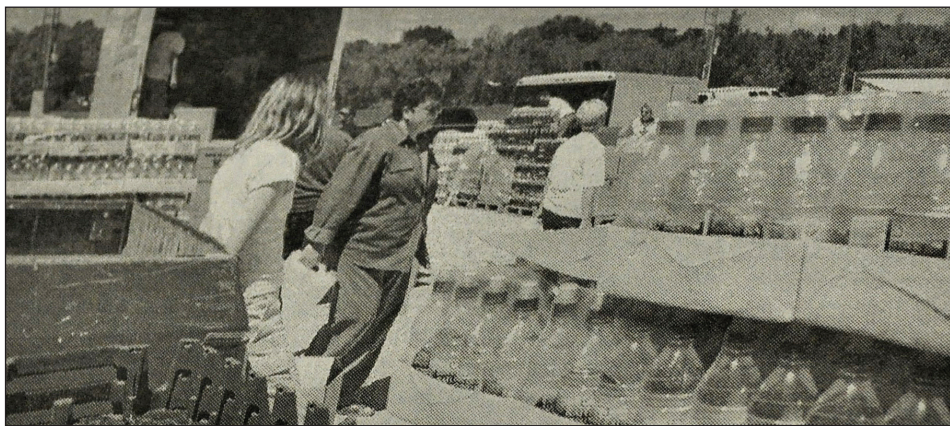
WALKERTON — In many ways, it was the “perfect storm” as far as disasters go — cuts to provincial funding for environmental oversight, inadequate water treatment by system operators with no formal training, a holiday weekend and a well that was vulnerable to contamination — when a severe thunderstorm with heavy rainfall flushed a deadly strain of E. coli bacteria into the town's water supply.

While more and more people became ill with cramps and bloody diarrhea, the public was assured the town's water was safe. Assurances continued to be given even the morning of May 21. By noon, however, lab results confirmed the cause of the illness was E. coli 0157. A boil water advisory was issued as a precaution. By the evening of May 21, one person had been airlifted to London for medical treatment and hundreds were ill. Everyone's worst fears were realized when the cause of the outbreak was finally determined to be the town's water supply — days after adverse test results were known.

At the height of the crisis, the sound of helicopters going to and from the hospital was as familiar to Walkerton residents as the smell of bleach. At least half of the town's residents had become ill and the death toll rose to seven.

Patrick Raftis, then-editor of the *Walkerton Herald-Times*, and presently a journalist with the *Wellington Advertiser*, recalls that he had been away camping on the long weekend. He listened to the news that night and learned people in Walkerton were getting sick. “I figured the next day we were going to be busy,” he said. An understatement, if there ever was one.

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Herald-Times File Photo

Dozens of volunteers helped dole out water at the Walkerton Community Centre in the days following the outbreak of the E.coli epidemic in Walkerton. Companies from across the country offered free water to residents.

Mayor Chris Peabody speaks on legacy fund created to commemorate water tragedy

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WALKERTON — The 20th anniversary of the water tragedy that forever changed Walkerton was marked quietly, with no ceremony.

Mayor Chris Peabody made a public statement to the people of Brockton about the event that had been planned for May 9 at the Walkerton Heritage Water Garden, followed by tours of the Walkerton Clean Water Centre.

Both are lasting memorials to the tragedy in Walkerton 20 years ago, and both speak to the resilience of the people of this community.

“I'd like to express my support and condolences to all who have suffered because of (the water tragedy),” said Peabody. “We know the pain will never entirely fade, so thank you for your courage and strength. No one in Walkerton was left untouched by the tragedy, and that's why we had planned to commemorate the anniversary with a public event ... The COVID-19 pandemic prevented us from doing that.”

Brockton has moved forward with one key aspect of the commemoration, to set up a new scholarship fund to assist students wanting to pursue careers in environmental protection and clean water management.

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COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Schools to remain closed for remainder of school year

Ford: 'It wasn't an easy decision, but it's the right decision'

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TORONTO — Students will not be returning to school this year.

Premier Doug Ford announced on Tuesday afternoon that Ontario's public schools will remain closed for the rest of the school year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“After consulting with health experts, it is clear that we cannot open schools at this

time,” said Ford. “I'm just not going to risk it.”

Added Ford, “It wasn't an easy decision to make, but it's the right decision.”

Private schools, licensed childcare centres and EarlyON programs will also remain closed through stage one of Ontario's reopening plan.

The Premier stated that a plan is in place to keep students learning during the pandemic, and that the government is planning for the reopening of schools for the 2020-21 school year.

“Today's announcement gives parents certainty, knowing that their children can continue to learn safely at home and that we have a plan for childcare as we work to gradually reopen more of our economy, when it is safe

to do so,” stated Ford.

The province says that all students who were on track to graduate from high school before the initial school closure order was made in March will be able to graduate, and that all students will receive report cards.

Later this summer, the Ontario government is expected to announce plans and safety protocols for students and staff ahead of returning to in-class instruction this fall.

Minister of education Stephen Lecce says this plan will feature an enhanced province-wide virtual learning program, “that will allow all students to learn, regardless of the challenges that may transpire in the coming months.”

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Brockton council looks at financial impact of COVID-19

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BROCKTON — Staff continue to keep council updated on losses, expenses and other financial information related to the COVID-19 emergency. A report by chief financial officer Trish Serratore outlined what's happening regarding the municipality's finances.

The estimated financial impact forecast up to June 30 shows a revenue loss of nearly \$434,283, offset by expense reductions of \$565,664, creating a projected net saving of \$131,182. Some of the items listed in Serratore's report are as follows.

Recreation shows a substantial loss in revenue of \$291,450, resulting from the closure of the pool, arena and community centres, with the facility closures — espe-

cially the Cargill Community Centre — making up \$180,650 of it.

At the same time, cost reductions, excluding labour, offset all but \$7,689 of that. When labour is calculated in, the result is a favourable budget impact of \$77,811.

The Brockton Child Care Centre continues to receive financial support from the county, meaning uncollectable fees of \$211,835 has been partially offset.

COVID-19 costs amount to \$27,649 including purchasing laptops for working remotely, legal counsel for staffing matters, additional signage and traffic barriers, as well as cleaning products.

The capital and special projects budget has been reviewed and a total of 13 projects have been deferred either partly or in full until 2021, in the amount of over \$4 million. This will assist with cash flow for the municipality.

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Walkerton... 20 years later

Walkerton water tragedy timeline

May 21 – A boil water order was issued by the Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound health unit, in response to the sickness that had hit Walkerton.

May 24 – The lead story in the *Walkerton Herald-Times* stated, “Don’t drink the water.” Dr. Murray McQuigge, medical officer of health, told area press, “This is absolutely an epidemic.” The health unit had received its first positive for E. coli 0157:H7, and the source of contamination was the town’s water.

May 31 – The paper’s top headline reflected the seriousness of the situation: “Killer bacteria strikes town.” Schools remained closed. Five people had already lost their lives to E. coli. However, the exact source of the contamination still wasn’t known.

June 7 – Help from nearby communities were pouring in, including a benefit concert in Chesley – a performance of Haydn’s *Creation*. Another concert was organized by the Walkerton Kinsmen. All levels of government were also stepping forward – MP Bill Murdoch announced \$100,000 from the province. The Walkerton community centre became the official drop-off and pick-up place for donations of water. The next day, a study of the town’s wells and aquifer got underway.

June 14 – “A bomb waiting to go off,” is how Dr. Murray McQuigge, medical officer of health, described Ontario’s supply of drinking water. “We knew for a certainty this was going to happen,” he said, pointing a finger at the switch to private labs for water testing in 1996 and describing it as a “bad idea” right from the start. At that point, not even three weeks into the crisis, the number of sick people stood at over 2,000 in the town of 5,000, and over 20 people suffered kidney damage. Meanwhile, four provincial cabinet ministers arrived in Walkerton to announce details of a financial package for victims of the E. coli outbreak. And the Walkerton Concerned Citizens group formed out of frustration and anger at the outbreak.

June 21 – Toronto Maple Leafs forwards Sergei Berezin and Tie Domi visited Walkerton students attending school in alternate locations. And the question on a lot of minds was who was going to pick up the tab for the clean-up of the town’s water system. Earlier in the crisis, Mayor David Thomson had announced the municipality was going ahead with the clean-up and would worry later who would pay. MP Ovid Jackson began collecting personal donations from his fellow MPs and handed over \$2,000 to the local Kinsmen and Kinettes.

June 28 – A small number of new cases of E. coli emerged, although the worst part of the crisis was over.

July 5 – The local health unit was looking at long-term effects of E. coli. While most would recover completely, a small percentage of people would suffer complications including impaired kidney function to the point dialysis is required, high blood pressure, seizures, gallstones and blindness.

July 12 – Disinfecting the water

system in Walkerton proved to be a monumental job, but it was expected to be done by early August.

July 17 – Justice Dennis O’Connor, head of the inquiry into the tainted water crisis, was planning to spend time in Walkerton to “get a feel” for things prior to the start of the inquiry in the fall. And the boil water order continued in the town. And Joe Rys was organizing a trip to see a Blue Jays game Sept. 4 for any town residents who wanted to go. The town would be guests of the ‘Jays. In addition to being about fun for residents, it was also meant to raise awareness of the tragedy outside the community. The game wasn’t the only entertainment planned for Walkerton – the first Watershed Festival would feature such performers as Jamie Warren.

July 26 – Walkerton Concerned Citizens expressed concern over the decision to halt the transport of bulk water to Walkerton, in favour of expanding bottled water distribution. The new plan still didn’t address the problem of seniors having to pick up heavy containers of water at the arena and transport them to their homes. It was announced the Mercy Brothers would perform at the Sept. 3 Watershed concert.

Aug. 2 – Justice Dennis O’Connor spent four days holding informal meetings with Walkerton residents, hearing tales of pain and fear. In all, there were about 50 presentations, among them a riveting reading from her diary by Betty Borth, who described the suffering of her husband Norm Borth; accounts by Pauline Gay and Philip Holmes of how the water tragedy depressed local real estate markets; and a question by Gay about how far back the inquiry would go, since her daughter had suffered a mysterious illness in 1995 that had symptoms alarmingly similar to those affected by E. coli. The Ministry of the Environment ordered corrective action at 72 water treatment plants across Ontario. And people kept boiling their water.

Aug. 9 – A celebrity golf tournament raised \$40,000 for E. coli relief. And the Walkerton Concerned Citizens hosted a meeting at which they heard how the E. coli outbreak illustrated the risk of service cuts.

Aug. 16 – The fundraising continued – two girls presented a giant cheque for \$63.54 for E. coli relief, raised by doing odd jobs.

Aug. 23 – Work began on replacing 3.5 kilometres of water lines around Walkerton.

Aug. 30 – Walkerton’s two high schools and three elementary schools were equipped with new plastic water pipes, fittings and toilets to prepare for the schools’ opening.

Sept. 6 – The first Watershed Festival drew over 6,000 people to Walkerton, to hear a star-studded lineup that included Paul Brandt, Jamie Warren, and the Mercy Brothers. The concert raised over \$500,000.

Oct. 16 – the public inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the water tragedy began.

O’Connor Inquiry’s recommendations implemented

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WALKERTON – Following the Walkerton water tragedy of 2000, in which seven people died and 2,300 became ill, the Ontario government established a public inquiry led by Justice Dennis O’Connor.

As stated in an Ontario government publication, his findings were released in two volumes. The Report of the Walkerton Inquiry Part One: The events of May 2000 and Related Issues was released in January, 2002 and contained 28 recommendations. The main focus was on public health units, enhancing communication between the environment ministry and health units, developing a boil water protocol, approvals and inspections, and training and certification. As of August 2007, all 28 recommendations had been implemented.

Part Two: A Strategy for Safe Drinking Water was released in May 2002 and contained 93 recommendations on a multi-barrier approach to managing drinking water and identified what was needed to reduce risk to public health at every stage of the system. The focus of these recommendations was the need for a Safe Drinking Water Act, financial requirements for sustainability, licensing and accreditation, and watershed-based source protection. All 93 recommenda-



Photos courtesy of the Walkerton Clean Water Centre
The Walkerton Clean Water Centre is a lasting legacy of the O’Connor inquiry that followed the water tragedy. It is a centre of excellence that provides world-class training for water system owners and operators.

tions had been implemented as of August 2007.

One of the most important things to come out of the inquiry recommendations was the Walkerton Clean Water Centre.

This is an operational service agency of the Ontario government, established in 2004, to ensure clean, safe drinking water for the entire province.

WCWC co-ordinates and provides education, training and information to drinking water system owners, operators and operating authorities in order to safeguard Ontario’s drink-

ing water. Through partnerships, WCWC also provides training for the 133 First Nations communities in the province. According to the WCWC website, to date, high quality training has been provided to more than 95,000 participants across Ontario.

The centre conducts hands-on training using working models of the water systems in use in the province, located at the site in Walkerton. The centre’s personnel also travel to First Nations and other remote locations to conduct training.



Former *Herald-Times* editor recalls covering water tragedy

Continued from front

While Raftis was putting the finishing touches on the paper, reporter Sue Ann Ellis interviewed water system operator Stan Koebel – the last interview he would give to the media. Koebel told her it couldn’t be the water.

Raftis drove the paper over to the press in Durham and set up at an old computer there, while Ellis attended that devastating press conference where the truth about the outbreak became public. Raftis remembers “holding the presses” despite pressure to get the paper done and printed, while he waited for Ellis’ story – “This was big,” he said. “People were going to die

from this.”

By the next day, in Raftis’ words, “Every media outlet in North America was on their way to Walkerton. It just went crazy.”

For a year, the water crisis was not just the main story in the local press, it was literally the only story, according to Raftis. While the electronic media focused on breaking news, Raftis kept his sites on the personal stories, the community information that was so desperately needed.

“The town was devastated,” he said. “At least initially, there was a lot of apprehension; so much was happening.”

Fortunately, he and the rest of the *Herald-Times* staff re-

mained healthy, thanks to the office water cooler that provided something that tasted better than what came out of the taps.

Now, 20 years later, the thing that Raftis remembers most is the way the community pulled together, and the outpouring of support from neighbouring communities.

The present COVID-19 crisis brings back memories of the tragedy 20 years ago. However, Raftis notes there is a major difference. “Back then, it was just Walkerton. This was contained, and technology could fix it. But there’s no fix for COVID and it’s everywhere ... You need that light at the end of the tunnel.”

Walkerton... 20 years later

From infamy to excellence

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WALKERTON – When Walkerton Concerned Citizens formed at the height of the Walkerton water tragedy, Bruce Davidson wanted to make sure the people of Walkerton had their say. He became the spokesman for that group. Now, 20 years later, he’s brought the story of the tragedy to every province in Canada except Prince Edward Island. He’s spoken in Saskatchewan a dozen times. Davidson said, “They had North Battleford a year later.” In a tainted water tragedy in 2001 with eerie similarities to Walkerton, 700 people got sick, although no one died. Now, 20 years later, Davidson speaks of the “silver lining” that came from the storm clouds of the Walkerton tragedy. “We’ve come from infamy to excellence.” From being a classic example of “what not to do,” Walkerton is now a “beacon of knowledge” in the form of the Walkerton Clean Water Centre. “The work we do here is being replicated as far away as China,” said Davidson, adding, “we’ve saved lives by taking that tragedy and showing there could be a better way forward.” He said he’s still asked frequently about what needs to be done. Davidson said 20 years down the

road, there’s a tendency for government to revert ... to a mindset where all regulations, all red tape, are bad. In a push to loosen regulations, he explained, “you lose checks and balances.” He also said “we really need to be aware there are regions of Ontario that are still very vulnerable (to water contamination). Everybody deserves safe water.” The third area that needs attention is private wells. Close to half the population of this area depends on private wells or systems that serve a handful of homes. These don’t get the scrutiny larger systems do, he said. “We’re not demanding people test water regularly,” he said. And testing is needed, whatever the size of the system. There’s still a need for ongoing education, still a need to protect a tremendously valuable resource – our drinking water. Speaking on the events of 20 years ago, Davidson said, “We couldn’t prevent the 50-year storm, but the well (that allowed E. coli-tainted water into the system) shouldn’t have been there.” He said, “Let’s stop cutting corners ... lightening up on inspections and responding only when we see a problem.” It may save money in the short term – in the case in question, cuts to the environment ministry saved about \$40 million, but the water tragedy caused the government to end



Walkerton Herald-Times File Photo
Bruce Davidson and others formed Walkerton Concerned Citizens, at the height of the water crisis, to ensure the people of the community had their say.

up spending \$200 million.” From the vantage point of 20 years, the water tragedy changed Walkerton, making it into a “strong, proud community.” Said Davidson, “We addressed the problem. Bad things will happen, but how we respond is what’s important.” The lessons learned 20 years ago

apply to what’s happening today. “We’ve been down this road before, and we can get through this,” said the Concerned Citizens spokesman.



Left: With schools closed, the local emergency department filled with sick children, and thousands sick, the E. coli 0157:H7 outbreak struck Walkerton with deadly intensity. The headline said it all – Killer bacteria strikes town. Right: In a matter of a few days, Walkerton was on the map. Among those who visited the town were then-premier, Mike Harris (foreground). In the background is MP Bill Murdoch.



Pauline Kerr Photos
The Walkerton Heritage Water Garden serves as a lasting memorial to those who died and became ill when E. coli contaminated Walkerton’s water 20 years ago. The garden, located near the hospital in Walkerton, tells the story of the crisis.



Legacy Fund will honour those who suffered, says Mayor Peabody

Continued from front

Said Peabody, “The Walkerton Clean Water Legacy Fund will honour those who suffered because of the water tragedy, and support local youth that are committed to keeping us, and our environment, safe and healthy.” The fund will be administered through Community Foundation Grey Bruce, with local representatives on the granting committee. Brockton council has committed \$2,500 to launch the fund, and the Walkerton Clean Water Centre is also contributing. Donations to the fund are welcome, and will be tax deductible. Peabody added, “I’d like to also reflect on the strength and resilience of our community and our leadership in clean water management, through the Walkerton Clean Water Centre,” noting the facility has trained over 95,000 people since it opened in 2004, ensuring a high level of expertise in water operators across the province. “People come here from all over the world to learn more about drinking water systems, and most stay at the hotel that Walkerton businesses created, partly to serve that need.” Steve Hrudey, an expert in clean drinking water who sat on the Walkerton Inquiry, said the Walkerton Clean Water Centre “may be the single most important legacy of the May 2000 disaster.” Hrudey has studied waterborne illnesses around the world –

there have been 24 outbreaks in affluent countries like ours in the past 20 years – and he was named to the Order of Canada recently for his contributions to environmental health sciences and for his advocacy of safe drinking water. In his view, “Ontario should be promoting the success story of the WCWC and Walkerton should be very proud of this initiative.” Peabody said that when the former mayor of Flint, Michigan visited Brockton last November she walked into the Walkerton Clean Water Centre and was moved to tears, saying she wished she could have a facility like that in Flint. “We met, and I said we’d be glad to help.” The mayor commented that Justice Dennis O’Connor, who led the Walkerton Inquiry after the crisis and lived in our community during that time, returned several times to paddle the Saugeen River. He and his wife had been looking forward to coming back here for the commemorative event we had planned, Peabody said. Peabody concluded by saying, “Although we can’t come together in person right now, we can celebrate the resilience of our community, which is evident all around us, in new businesses, new housing, new schools, and new housing developments. “We have also shown great resilience through the COVID-19 challenge we are currently facing. Please stay home, and stay safe.”