



RESERVING THEIR DECISIONS

By Mary Agnes Welch and Kevin Rollason

WASAGAMACK — Outside, a half-dozen cheerfully filthy kids play on a rickety, mud-caked porch made of old wooden pallets. Trash blankets the yard, as though a big wind blew in from the garbage dump. The walls of the trailer are a patchwork of greying plywood, rotten siding and plastic sheeting.

Inside is worse. It's the home of Richard Andrews and, off and on, his 12 children and grandchildren. It's arguably the most desperate of the 800-plus homes with no running water in Island Lake.

In a futile attempt to keep the inside tidy, shoes are left in a muddy pile at the door on a soggy piece of cardboard. Every wall is covered in graffiti or children's scribbles. It's not possible to wash the walls because there's no water, and the chipboard would crumble anyway. Several mismatched layers of ripped linoleum or sometimes just plain plywood cover the gritty floors. A mound of dirty laundry is piled near the door, waiting for a trip to the school, where there's a washing machine. A slop pail sits in the makeshift bathroom, an only slightly more appealing alternative than the toxic outhouse in the backyard.

Andrews' daughter, Martha, has had to medicate her young son to Winnipeg with asthma several times, and she struggles to keep the kids clean, especially in the summer when they play outside in the muck.

"It's really hard," she said, standing next to a sticky countertop and a pile of dirty dishes stacked in a sink with no tap. "I change their clothes, and after five minutes they go back there, and you can't keep track sometimes."

The kids get skin rashes, and several family members have chronic asthma made worse by the home's mould, which in turn is made worse by the family's inability to clean.

More than 1,400 homes in remote First Nations don't have running water. Most are near the Andrews family in the cluster of four reserves around Island Lake.

In Wasagamack, more than 60 per cent of homes have no running water, not even a cistern that's filled weekly by a water truck and then serves indoor toilets and taps.

Combine that with one of the worst housing shortages in the province — Wasagamack needs double its 250 homes for people to live reasonably — and it's a crisis.

It's also not the provincial government's problem, at least not directly.

The Canadian constitution is crystal clear: aboriginals and the lands reserved for aboriginals are the responsibility of the federal government.

But the crisis is costing the province millions in related health, housing and social services costs as people fly to Winnipeg hospitals, families break down, children struggle in school and families flee to Winnipeg with few job skills and little choice but to apply for social assistance. And, since Ottawa appears unwilling to move quickly to end the crisis, the province is coming under increasing pressure to act.

It's hard to determine exactly how much the water and sewer crisis is costing the province, in part because it's difficult to tease out which doctor visits, infections, asthma attacks and stomach ailments are the result of abysmal sanitation. And there is probably no funding model more complicated than the hodgepodge that covers federal and provincial health programs on and off reserve.

In 2005 two researchers were asked by the Manitoba Intergovernmental Committee on First Nation Health to look at the books kept by both governments on aboriginal health payments in the 2003-04 fiscal year.

The resulting report, published in 2006, found it cost \$479 million for medical care for aboriginal people living on reserves for the year looked at.

Of that, Manitoba Health and the province's regional health authorities paid 40.3 per cent of all health expenditures for those aboriginal people while Health Canada paid 47.6 per cent.

It's a lot of money and it's expected to be higher in future. The study estimates that, based on population growth, by 2029 it will cost \$754 million to pay for health care for aboriginal people living on reserves.

We asked the province's political leaders what they would do to help solve the no-running-water crisis in northern Manitoba:

Manitoba's three party leaders all agree a massive health and social crisis exists in the North because of the lack of running water... the question is, what are they prepared to do about it?

NDP Leader Greg Selinger

PREMIER Greg Selinger hasn't yet had a "Bob Rae" moment.

In 1992, after a visit to ramshackle reserve homes in northern Ontario, then-NDP Premier Bob Rae decided to overlook the issue of constitutional jurisdiction and fix the problem himself. That decision helped create a \$200-million joint federal-provincial fund that renovated thousands of northern Ontario homes, many without running water.

In dozens of ways, the Manitoba government has also overlooked jurisdiction by picking up Ottawa's slack when it comes to on-reserve services such as dialysis, suicide prevention and child welfare. But it has, understandably, shied away from housing projects or building hard infrastructure on reserves.

Selinger has never visited a home with no running water, but he was in Wasagamack two weeks ago, where he spoke at length with a woman struggling with an overcrowded home with no toilet or taps.

"Every Manitoban should have the same level of essential services like water and sewer," Selinger said. "We've offered to be part of the solution, by offering training money and to work closely with the community to provide the skills that will allow these homes to be upgraded."

That's come in the form of a pilot project now underway in Red Sucker Lake, where band members are trained to become carpenters, plumbers and electricians, and they renovate homes and install toilets, sinks and pipes.

The chief of Wasagamack says a similar project is underway in his community involving about 10 band members who will build additions onto homes to house toilets, sinks and tubs.

That's a start, and it helps the province pressure Ottawa by essentially doing the work but disguising it as training and education, which is more the province's bailiwick. But it's limited in scope.

Asked whether the province would ever consider chipping in on hard infrastructure, such as pipes or water and sewer plants, Selinger said yes.

"If the federal government would take their fiduciary responsibility and fund it, we would look at any reasonable partnerships to get this done," he said. "We will work with them to solve the problem, but we also want them to take the responsibility to finance it properly."

But Selinger would not put a dollar figure on his commitment — northern chiefs have suggested \$33 million — and he would not commit to solving the problem before the next election.

"I'd like to get it done as soon as possible," he said.

Liberal Leader Jon Gerrard

THE party has gone into the election with only one seat, but if it elects a lot more candidates and becomes the government, Liberal Leader Jon Gerrard is promising aboriginal people in the north will finally have the same water and sewer services taken for granted by people in southern Manitoba.

Gerrard, who has visited several homes without running water, especially during the H1N1 outbreak, said the problem has gone on too long.

"People were living in crowded conditions, and people were having to walk outside to get the water and to haul it," he said.

"It was like what people have to do in Africa. And they would have an outhouse and no shower... People in First Nation communities are Manitoba citizens as well as Canadians."

"There is an imperative for the provincial government to stand tall and deal with the federal government to make sure this is addressed."

Gerrard said he would hope the federal government would pay for it all, but if not, he would look at the Ontario model of cost sharing.

Gerrard said he would not see the water and sewer systems fixed, he would also address the

overriding health problem of overcrowding by seeing the province create a housing centre, affiliated with the University College of the North, where research and training would be done to make sure the houses built in northern communities were the type needed by people there.

"We'd use northern materials too, like having local homes," he said.

Tory Leader Hugh McFadyen

TORY Leader Hugh McFadyen may have one of the more creative solutions to the province's running-water woes.

He said a Conservative government would be willing to help fund water and sewer projects on reserves as long as the bands and the federal government are willing, too.

But he said there may be a way to kill two birds with one stone.

There is a collection of small northern towns — villages such as Easterville and Moose Lake that are satellites of First Nations reserves — that may have their own water and sewer problems, such as aging treatment plants, old sewage lagoons or a system of honey wagons (tanker trucks that suck out sewage waste from a holding tank and transport it to a sewage lagoon for treatment) and water trucks that visit homes with no pipes.

Those communities are the province's responsibility, and it may make sense for the province to chip in for new water and sewer plants that could also serve the nearby First Nation.

That would help bands that are unable to operate their own crumbling water and sewer plants or that are unable to get Ottawa's attention to build new plants and install new pipes.

"There are certain benefits that come from off-reserve and on-reserve communities working together when they are close enough to one another to put facilities in place that serve both," said McFadyen.

McFadyen has visited several homes without running water in Garden Hill and St. Theresa Point.

"It was really terrible," he said. "The overcrowding in a lot of the houses is unbelievable. The water situation is something that anybody in this day and age in Manitoba would consider to be unacceptable."

He said he floated the idea of joint federal-provincial water treatment projects with Conservative ministers in Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government.

The idea neatly sidesteps the messy jurisdiction issue. It allows the province to build hard infrastructure that serves a reserve without actually encroaching on Ottawa's bailiwick.

But Eric Robinson, the province's aboriginal and northern affairs minister, said the plan would just give Ottawa a way of shirking its responsibility.

Robinson said the idea isn't new and the province has already been upgrading and expanding water and sewer treatment facilities in communities it oversees in the North, but it wouldn't be as easy as it sounds to hook up the aboriginal reserves to these systems.

And the Tory idea doesn't work as well in the Island Lake region, the epicentre of the province's running-water crisis, where more than 800 homes have no service, not even a cistern. Island Lake is too isolated, and there is no non-reserve community nearby where the province could park its own water-treatment plant.

McFadyen would not put a dollar figure on his commitment, saying there are still too many questions marks about the real cost of providing running water to the hundreds of homes that lack it. And he stopped short of committing to a complete solution before the end of his first term, if he is elected premier Oct. 4.

"What I can commit to is we'll make progress on the problem," he said.

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NO RUNNING WATER

What's the problem?

Roughly 1,400 homes on northern Manitoba reserves have no running water and no proper sewage disposal. Many families fetch clean water daily from community taps — an arduous task in the winter — or they take pails of contaminated water from nearby lakes for cleaning. Some families get weekly water delivery from trucks, but their outdoor cisterns aren't connected to indoor plumbing or aren't cleaned properly. Many families use outhouses or dump slop pails behind their homes, creating a reeking river of human waste. It's a sad state of affairs that the aboriginal people without running water would fare better living in a United Nations refugee camp. According to UN rules, they would have access to 20 litres of clean water each day, they wouldn't have to walk more than 200 metres to get it and water would be tested at least once a month. Last year, a *Free Press* extensive investigation found many families live with less than 15 litres of water per day and must walk kilometres to fetch it.

What's the spinoff?

A health crisis. If you're living with raw sewage sitting inside your home, with no clean water for bathing, cooking, laundry or cleaning, you get sick more often. Homes become disease factories. Simple things, such as keeping cuts, clean or washing hands to control a flu bug, become impossible. Superbugs that cause nasty skin boils, respiratory infections such as asthma, skin ailments such as impetigo and stomach troubles such as diarrhoea are chronic. It's even hard to brush your teeth, so tooth decay is rampant, made worse by the fact that many children drink pop or juice because they can't drink the water. All this costs taxpayers millions in health-care costs that could be avoided.

What's the solution?

There are a few. In the short term — say, as soon as the winter road opens in the new year — some bands have asked for the construction of central laundry facilities and central showers at a cost of about \$8 million for Island Lake alone. So far Ottawa has chipped in \$1 million for new slop buckets, large new water containers and a few new water and sewer trucks. In the medium term, cisterns may be the answer for many homes. Those are huge water tanks that are filled up weekly by water trucks and connected to indoor plumbing. They can at least supply water for showers, kitchen sinks and flush toilets. But cisterns get slimy and toxic if they aren't cleaned regularly, and they often don't provide enough water for a big family. Long-term, First Nations want water and sewer pipes installed for each home, just as most other Manitobans enjoy. Septic fields aren't ideal because many reserves are built on bedrock and a septic system risks contaminating nearby lakes. For many homes in spread-out reserves, installing pipes is immensely costly, because it means blasting through bedrock. Some have suggested building apartments or duplexes close to the centre of town, where pipes already exist on reserve.

How much will it cost?

That's a messy question. A decade ago, a consulting firm put the price at \$210 million to connect the remaining First Nations homes to water and sewer pipes, but that figure is now woefully out of date and doesn't reflect the millions spent by Ottawa since then on projects like the one in Garden Hill a couple of years ago that hooked up some homes. More recently, Manitoba's northern Grand Chief David Harper estimated it would cost \$33 million for in-home upgrades — installing toilets, bathtubs and sinks, hooking houses up to water and sewer tanks and upgrading homes' electrical systems — and about the same to install water and sewer pipes to many homes in the north. Meanwhile, a federal report released in the summer by Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada said it will cost \$82 million to upgrade the existing water and sewer plants on Manitoba First Nations, but that didn't include building new. AANDC has earmarked \$130 million over the next five years for water and waste projects in Manitoba.