

The City of Whitehorse has come around again to evaluate the uses of Schwatka Lake. Schwatka Lake is a valuable and attractive asset to Whitehorse residents, but I am compelled to remember that it is there for us to use or enjoy only as a result of the Power Dam that created it. As a long-time Yukoner, experienced environmental professional, and a commercial floatplane pilot, I know the issues involved. I expect there will be some sensitivities you may be surprised by without some background. With this in mind I would like to submit this short review of the history and the actual risks before defining any objectives here.

Fiscal, practical, and moral realities require the City to respond on the basis of facts, not perceptions, no matter how popular. Only in this way will the result of your efforts be accurate, and useful. It will also fulfill our practical and moral obligation not to waste tax money and our time.

Some of the long-time Yukon pilots still have the letter that they received from the City of Whitehorse that required them to relocate their float planes onto Schwatka Lake. The argument then was that this location was both safe and convenient. Floatplanes have operated safely from this location ever since.

I recall that more recently while this lake was still the domestic water supply for the City (which is no longer the case), water quality was never compromised by floatplane operation. Fecal coliforms from wildlife, and other biological concerns appeared during sampling, but NEVER was any industrial residue detected that was even remotely connected to floatplanes.

Now, from a scientific perspective, based on my Science degree and 30 years in the business of monitoring water quality (15 of them with Environment Canada right here in Whitehorse) I know that aircraft present no risks to Schwatka Lake, or the environs.

From a contaminants point of view, even a catastrophic total loss of fuel or oil from any aircraft would only be detectable in the very short term. The specific gravity of Aviation fuel is so light that it will come to the surface nearly immediately, and it is so volatile that within hours it will have evaporated. There will be no detectable soluble component detectable in the water.

Although there have never been any aircraft related losses, this was even found to be the case when vehicles were totally submerged in this lake, occasionally for several days, and automotive gas technically presents a higher risk. If the risks of aircraft operation is compared to the risk of byproducts of boating, the difference is many orders of magnitude. 2-Cycle boat oil is designed to be non-combustible and is intended to be discharged directly into the water after providing lubrication to the motor.

From a wildlife perspective (the other 15 years of my career here), I can safely state that no effects on birds or fish are quantifiable. From studies, any disruption to wildlife behaviour from any motor vehicle operation is only momentary. Harassment by people

and pets are far more significant to wildlife, including waterfowl. Even in these cases it is almost always short term.

From the esthetic and social perspective very few people are disturbed by float aircraft. In most cases aircraft taxiing on the lake, or aircraft on final approach for the lake are indiscernible to people in the City. And, I think that for most people, the momentary sound of a floatplane on take-off from Schwatka Lake reasserts the unique life-style of a Northern community.

When it comes to the benefits to tourism and service industries, and the economic spin offs of float plane operation, they far outweigh any perceived risk, but I have limited experience here.

Finally, and where my concern is mostly fueled, this brings me to the question of what is the actual focus and motivation of some participants in this review. From the City's preliminary survey for this plan I quote;

"If City water and sewer were extended into the Schwatka Lake area in the future, this could facilitate other more varied and intensive uses (e.g. housing, tourism, retail, food/beverage, etc.). Do you think intensified uses are appropriate for the area? If so, which ones?"

From a purely logical evaluation of this "question" as phrased then, development of the Western edge of the lake is only possible with water and sewer expansion. Such false premises raise my level of concern significantly. Firstly this is because most of the aircraft operators in Whitehorse are still being inflicted with an expensive boondoggle of water and sewer expansion, demanded by the City of Whitehorse and that has been inflicted on us for the past six months at the airport. The need for this useless project was poorly conceived, the construction inefficient and likely poorly managed, and the results will be unusable for me. I have been informed that my lease fees and my taxes will now be doubled, regardless.

Secondly, the notion that a sewer system is the safest way to deal with wastes needs to be dispelled most vigorously. For more than 25 years, all of the domestic sewage coming from Riverdale, crossed the bridge at the SS Klondike, came down the 2nd Avenue main, turned East on Hanson, and was discharged directly under the Yukon Government main building through an inadvertently crushed sewer main, rather than proceeding North to the pump station and eventual treatment.

When this bizarre but prolonged problem became apparent, the City of Whitehorse was complicit in their avoidance of this situation, (from verbally denying its existence, to denying ownership, to long term routinely pumping and steaming of the service utilidors rather than researching the cause). My allegation is not that the City was responsible for this bizarre environmental mess, only that the City's bureaucratic momentum resisted discovery and nearly prevented rectification. As absurd as this sounds, it is absolutely true, you can't make this stuff up.

So I think you can understand my concern when these two issues are paired. I can't help but to mentally transfer the image of this summers mess at the airport, to the Western edge of Schwatka Lake, then I recall the City's historic maintenance and operation of said systems, and long term problems, and I shudder.

For me, in a poker game where I feel the City is beginning another Machiavellian campaign for the expansion of their infrastructure, falsely justified, and placed on the back of floatplane operators, I have to call "bull-shit". I see no need to require water and sewer on the South and West side of Schwatka Lake. The cost, and the risk, is not warranted. Instead, trucking water and sewage is environmentally benign and economical on any appropriate scale of development here.

Finally, I would like to remind the City that Schwatka Lake is a gazetted float plane base and as such is controlled by Federal jurisdiction. Any attempt by the City of Whitehorse to regulate that activity on the lake would be, in my opinion, ultra-vires, and any attempt to regulate that activity on the land immediately surrounding the lake would also be legally tenuous.

My last point is to remind the City, and participants, that "Policy" is INTERNAL to Governments, it is NOT binding on the public. Any attempted to create and apply "Policy" as a means to obtain controls not otherwise codified is outside legal basis. I know the City does not want to step onto shaky legal grounds and none of us want this process to end with senseless rules that are unenforceable.

I recommend care therefore in any infrastructure expansion, in making unwarranted rules, or creating or manipulating public expectations.

Thank you Sincerely
Jacob G Balmer

(historic photos attached)



Removing a vehicle from Schwatka Lake in 2004



Placing sample wells for sewage behind YTG Main Building in 2004



Water sampling in City of Whitehorse in 2006