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Presentation to Wilmot Council re: Risks of Hallman Pit

April 4, 2022

By Susan Bryant on behalf of GREN (Grand River Environmental Network)

Good evening Mayor Armstrong, Wilmot Council members and citizens: Thank you for the opportunity to speak. I'm Susan Bryant speaking on behalf of the Grand River Environmental Network and APT Environment in Elmira. Here, I want to sketch briefly the story of the Elmira Water crisis and its aftermath as a cautionary tale about protecting groundwater BEFORE it becomes contaminated. The disastrous groundwater and surface water contamination in Elmira, identified in 1989, was and is one of the worst such events in Ontario. Thirty-some years later, the Elmira community, the Region, the Ontario Ministry, and the chemical facility once called Uniroyal, as well as Ontario taxpayers, are still expending time, effort and money dealing with the fallout. That will go on for the foreseeable future.

When our family moved to the peaceful town of Elmira in the mid 1970s, I never dreamed that activism around groundwater would become a defining part of my life. I didn't even know what groundwater was, though it came out of my taps. But everyone in Elmira learned all about it in 1989 when we suddenly discovered our aquifers were lost, our municipal wells shut down, and our tap water was toxic. As Joni Mitchell sings, You don't know what you've got till it's gone.

Over the next weeks and months, we learned that our very productive aquifer, the town's water supply about 300 meters underground, was contaminated with a toxic brew of hundreds of chemicals. The source was the Uniroyal chemical company where over 40 years, production wastes had been buried in pits all over the site, as well as dumped into overflowing lagoons and into the creek flowing through the property. These included toxic pesticides, fertilizers, DDT, and dioxins from the production of Agent Orange during the Vietnam war. The soil and water on the site was, and still is, saturated with chemicals. The contaminant plume still extends under about half the town. Fortunately, only one chemical, carcinogenic NDMA---the one that was most soluble in water---had reached the two municipal wells. We have never found out for how long we were drinking contaminated water from our taps.

While Elmiraans filled jugs of clean water from tanker trucks brought to the fire station, the Region of Waterloo scrambled to build an emergency pipeline from the Kitchener-Waterloo water system to bring water to Elmira. And into the early 1990s, lawyers wrangled over what should be done in several long hearings before the Environmental Appeal Board. The Elmira disaster was thus a story in the media for years. And Elmira suffered the humiliation of being known far and wide as a contaminated community.

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The Ontario Ministry of Environment finally ordered the company to do the following: 1) Excavate some of the buried waste pits. 2) Contain the contaminated aquifers under their property to keep the contamination from spreading further off the site. 3) Clean up the off-site aquifer to drinking water quality in 30 years (by 2028). About 12 extraction wells on the Uniroyal property and about 8 around the town pump contaminated water out of the aquifers, treat it to remove the contaminants, and dump it into the creek. The idea is to prevent the contamination from spreading. This process will have to go on forever.

It's now clear that the pump and treat method cannot achieve the goal of restoring drinking water by 2028. The contamination is being reduced, slowly. But the aquifers will likely never be clean enough to provide drinking water.

So the key moral of the story is a bad-news lesson. Once groundwater is contaminated with chemicals, it can't be uncontaminated. Preventing groundwater contamination in the first place is the only real fix. Full stop.

However, there's also a good news lesson in the Elmira experience. I've learned that the vigilance and action of ordinary local citizens—and their local government representatives---make a real difference in keeping our water clean.

In the Elmira case, citizen action took place after the crisis, when the damage was done. But it was still meaningful. We had formed a little environment group in Elmira, APT Environment, some months before the crisis. That timing was just plain lucky. We were ordinary, well-behaved residents with little background in science, activism, or environmental issues. When the water crisis hit, we stepped up our game.

But the crisis was traumatic for our small town. For the next ten years, the atmosphere around the issue was adversarial. The attitude of company management at the time was one of contempt, especially for the community activists. The town was invaded by media wanting to get the story of one of the biggest pollution events in Ontario. Thus our proud community felt shamed, and some characterized APT's work as "radical," as inciting people to panic, as giving the town a bad name.

Nevertheless, APT membership grew to about 50 families. We participated in the hearings and wrote comments on every major report and recommendation. We gathered the facts and talked with politicians, community groups, and the media. We had good parties to keep our spirits up. We continue today to participate in the regular meetings between the Ministry, the company, and local governments.

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Our contributions and vigilance have made the remediation process in Elmira significantly better than it would be without us. We have not won all our battles, but we have achieved much through sheer persistence.

I don't say that to boast--But to encourage all of you who face environmental threats in your own communities. It's hard work to protect your air and water from risky land uses. But it's necessary, meaningful and effective. People who stand up to defend the health of their own back yards—and therefore all of our back yards—are a powerful force. When government regulators, politicians and big companies know that people in the affected community are paying attention, **they** pay attention and you get at least some of what you want.

In Wilmot right now, you have a precious opportunity to proactively reduce risks to your groundwater and thus prevent contamination. The Elmira story illustrates that this, proactive prevention, is a much better path than struggling with the fallout once it happens.