

Part One: Controversial Erin wastewater facility, which poses severe environmental risks, surrounded by questionable dealings

By Rachel Morgan - Local Journalism Initiative Reporter/Alexis Wright
Oct 23, 2022 - Brampton, Mississauga, Niagara

It's the time of year when the Brook trout are spawning. The olive coloured species, painted by nature with blue and red spots and orange fins, work their way to their spawning grounds between September and November.

The freshwater fish thrive in cool water, between six and fourteen degrees, making the Missinnihe – what is commonly called the Credit River – the last self-sustaining ecosystem for the Brook trout population in southern Ontario. The provincial fish of Nova Scotia, they have been around locally for as long as the river has, at least 10,000 years.

The Brook trout population has declined rapidly in recent years. Urbanization, climate change and the increase of alarming chloride concentrations have jeopardized the species locally. Chloride levels are typically lower in the summer months, but an [investigation by The Pointer of the 11 monitoring stations](#) maintained by the CVC in the months of June and July found levels in the majority of stations were above what can cause long-term harm. Spikes were nearly three times as high as levels known to cause acute harm

Now, the sensitive species, closely related to salmon, and their habitat are threatened by a Wastewater Treatment Facility (WWTF) in Erin, just north of Peel.



The Credit River is the last self-sustaining ecosystem for Brook trout in Southern Ontario.

(Steve Noakes/Coalition for the West Credit River)

The WWTF has been controversial from the beginning. Erin has not previously had a municipal wastewater system and residents currently rely on individual septic tanks.

The construction of the facility, and the new underground sewer system will be a huge burden to property owners now facing a large bill from the Town for the required hook-up to the new system. The Town has said it is seeking assistance from the provincial government to help residents with these costs.

Many residents were shocked when they were told that not only would they be forced to pay as much as an estimated \$40,000, their property taxes will see a sharp hit, and subdivision developers who pushed for the new wastewater system, to make their projects more attractive, will get serviced first.

On top of all these concerns, residents like Bob Pearson are deeply disturbed by the environmental risks the treated

effluent from the new wastewater facility will cause to the river ecosystem, where it will be deposited.

"To me, the environment is more than just the air we breathe or the land we walk on, or the water we drink. It's more than that. It's the people, it's the feel, it's what's here," Pearson says.

Pearson has been living in the Town of Erin for over two decades. Going into business with his father at age 18, Pearson worked in manufacturing until he retired a few months ago. Community and family are very important to Pearson raising his family in the quaint Town. These values led to his interest in the wastewater treatment plant because of how it would impact friends and family in the community.

He is an active member of the Erin community and formerly sat on three advisory committees to the Town. He is one of many residents vehemently opposed to the WWTF. He has become an amateur investigator, doing his own due diligence to hold all the parties involved accountable.

"I've become involved with it because I felt it was being rammed down the throats of the existing residents," he says. "I should state that I'm not against development. What I oppose is to force costs onto the existing taxpayers more than what we've already been paying in property taxes."



Bob Pearson has sat on multiple committees for the Town of Erin. He stepped down from the committee roles over frustration with the inner workings of council. Pearson is one of Erin's most outspoken residents on the wastewater treatment plant.

(Alexis Wright/The Pointer)

According to Pearson, residents of the Town of Erin pay more in property taxes than any other municipality within Wellington Region (The Pointer did not confirm this). He is not happy with the services they get in return.

"Even though we're part of Wellington County, and we pay to Wellington County, the Town still takes a big honkin chunk of what we contribute," Pearson says. "In return, we were getting next to nothing."

While taxpayers are contributing to the costs of the treatment plant, he says it is the developers who will benefit.

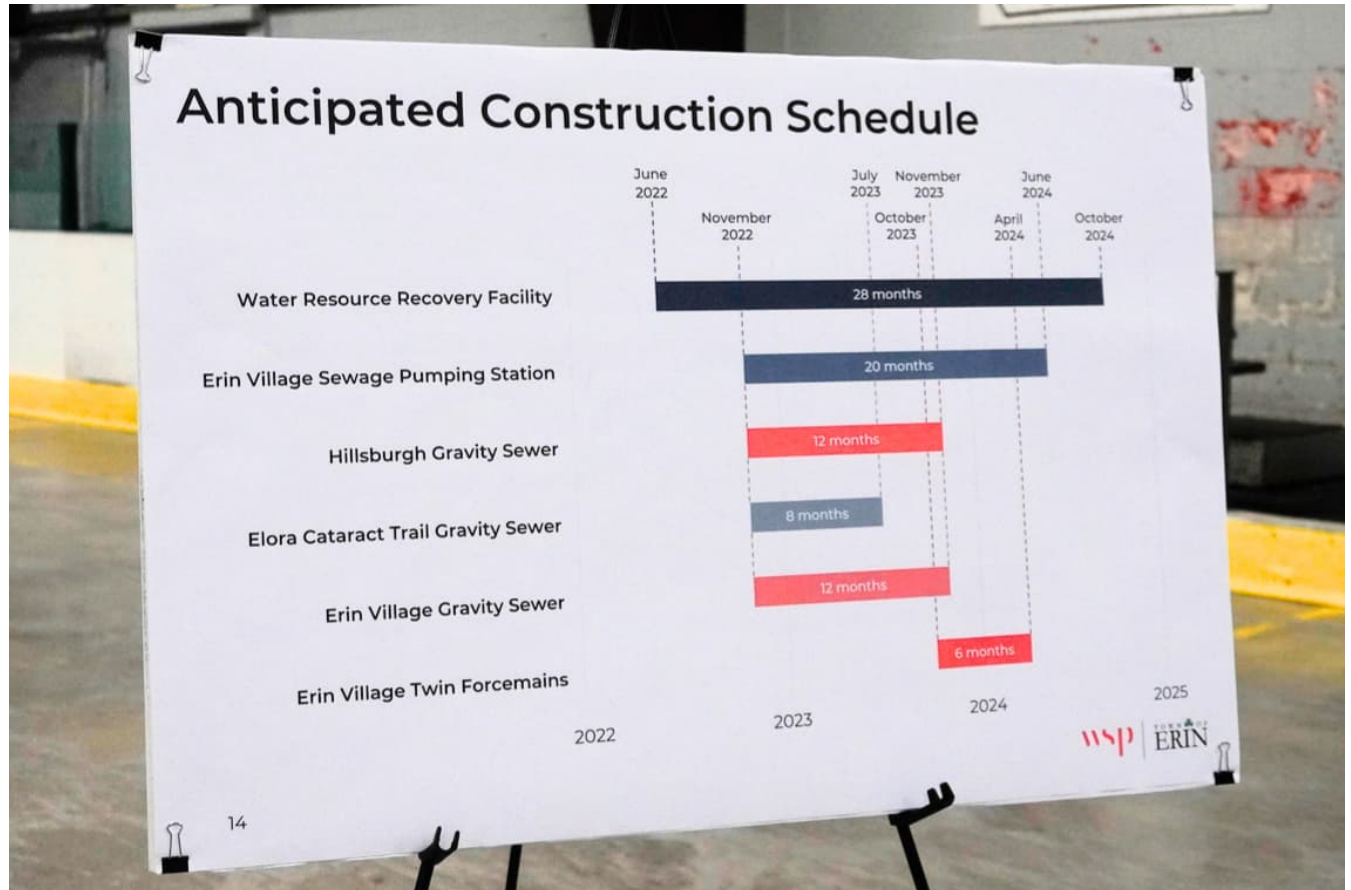
Solmar Development Corp, owned by Benny Marotta, sold the lands for the Water Resource Recovery Facility (WRRF)—a piece of the larger wastewater treatment facility—to the Town for just \$2, and work is well underway preparing for the multi-million dollar units that will make up the future Erin Glen subdivision, which will be the first development to connect to the WRRF.

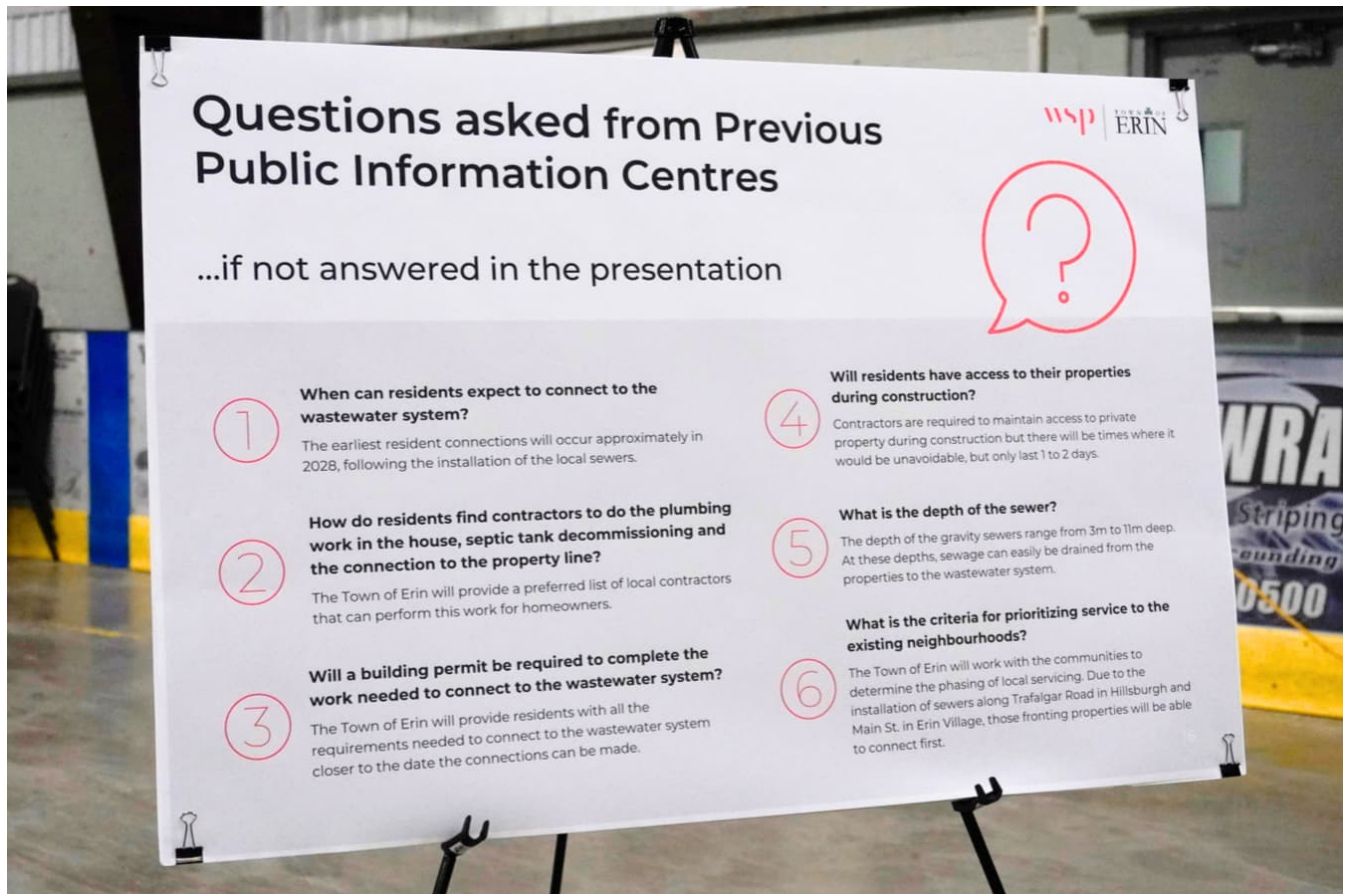
Along with Solmar's subdivision, one of the other landowners tied to future development in the area is connected to

Chantler's Environmental Services. Its owner, Stewart Chantler, has started the groundwork for a development on the north end of the town where he owns land.

Over a decade ago, Chantler made plans to build a WWTF on those lands to service Erin and the future developments that had been predicted. He followed all the steps of the process and spent hundreds of thousands on the design and environmental assessment for the project. His plans were to use the treated effluent (the byproduct from the water filtration process) to safely irrigate farmland across the street.

At the eleventh hour, the Town changed its mind on Chantler's project. Chantler, angered by the move, rezoned his lands for residential development which will now be part of phase one of hookups for the new wastewater system. After a decision following an in-camera (closed door) session of Erin Council in late 2021, Chantler's lands were slated to get the initial service.





Questions asked from Previous Public Information Centres

wsp | TOWN OF ERIN

...if not answered in the presentation



1

When can residents expect to connect to the wastewater system?

The earliest resident connections will occur approximately in 2028, following the installation of the local sewers.

2

How do residents find contractors to do the plumbing work in the house, septic tank decommissioning and the connection to the property line?

The Town of Erin will provide a preferred list of local contractors that can perform this work for homeowners.

3

Will a building permit be required to complete the work needed to connect to the wastewater system?

The Town of Erin will provide residents with all the requirements needed to connect to the wastewater system closer to the date the connections can be made.

4

Will residents have access to their properties during construction?

Contractors are required to maintain access to private property during construction but there will be times where it would be unavoidable, but only last 1 to 2 days.

5

What is the depth of the sewer?

The depth of the gravity sewers range from 3m to 11m deep. At these depths, sewage can easily be drained from the properties to the wastewater system.

6

What is the criteria for prioritizing service to the existing neighbourhoods?

The Town of Erin will work with the communities to determine the phasing of local servicing. Due to the installation of sewers along Trafalgar Road in Hillsburgh and Main St. in Erin Village, those fronting properties will be able to connect first.

Residents were invited to attend an information meeting on August 23 related to the wastewater treatment facility.

(Alexis Wright/The Pointer)

One of the main entities involved, Williams Sale Partnership (WSP), a construction consulting and project management company, was founded in England, and has its Canadian hub in Vaughan. The Town of Erin hired the company to plan and oversee the WWTF project.

Claiming the project was in its 'pre-construction phase', it set up enlarged presentation slides for the public to view during a public meeting on August 23, and its staff stood off to the side to answer any questions from attendees.

When asked about the potential extinction of an entire species, the Brook trout, WSP's Senior Project Manager for the WWTF, Claudio Micelli, laughed and said "we hope that doesn't happen".

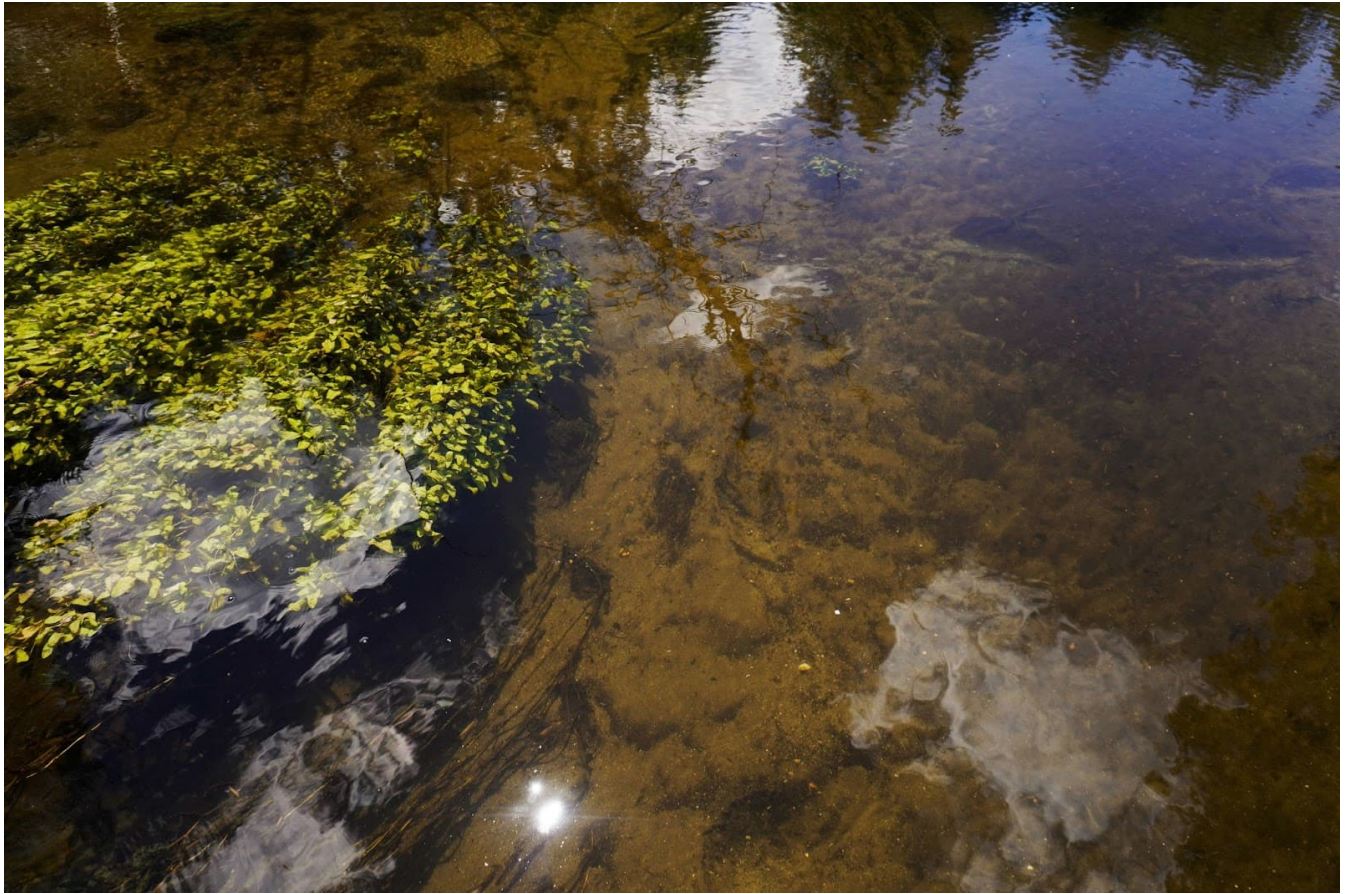
Jamie Cheyne, a councillor for the Town of Erin, works in sales and marketing for Chantler's Environmental Services, the company owned by one of the land owners preparing to welcome residential development. Concerned about the obvious conflict of interest, Pearson requested the Town's Integrity Commissioner look into Cheyne. According to Pearson, the Integrity Commissioner only spoke to the mayor, Allan Ails, and after the mayor provided information, the investigation was dropped.

The Pointer asked Cheyne and the Town about Pearson's complaint. Cheyne said he has recused himself from all debates and votes on the WWTF since the concerns were raised.

According to Pearson, the Integrity Commissioner did not look into the connection between Chantler Environmental Services, its employee, Cheyne (who is also a council member) and the decision to include lands owned by the company's head in the first phase of the hook-up, before many existing residents.

The town's integrity commissioner, according to Pearson who filed the complaint, did not interview Cheyne. It's unclear why the man at the centre of the complaint would not be spoken to.

"And prior to that, Councillor Cheyne had been voting on absolutely everything involved in the sewage treatment system, which included now, his employer, the land that Stewart Chantler owned," Pearson says.



Before French settlers came to what we now know as Ontario, the Indigenous peoples named the river Missinnihe (now the Credit River), meaning trusting creek in Eastern Ojibwe.

(Alexis Wright/The Pointer)

Used as a source for freshwater, food, and transportation of goods for thousands of years – the west branch the river currently flows at an average width and depth of six and 0.3 metres, respectively. [Previous reporting by The Pointer](#) states 7.2 million litres of effluent from the WWTF will be discharged every day into the river, almost certain to impact its width, depth, and flow. The largest concern, however, is the impact on water temperature. The Brook trout needs the water to remain cool, but the heated effluent has the potential to increase the temperature dramatically which could eliminate the species from the area.

Town and WSP officials have given vague assurances that the effluent will be cooled enough to prevent harm to the Brook trout and other species.

The development process on the WWTF to date has left many residents concerned about the plant's future impacts, and who truly gains to benefit from its construction. To make matters worse, some residents see the project as a missed opportunity for the Town of Erin to become a leader in using ecologically friendly sewage systems.

"To me it's such a crime. We were so far ahead as leaders back in 2000, that we just fell backwards," Pierre Brianceau says.

Brianceau, a former school board trustee and a county councillor from 2014 to 2018, was the one who pushed for the creation of Centre 2000. The community centre was built with the intention of becoming a hub for all the needs of the community, with a new school, library, arena, town hall and seniors services.

The sewage system that was put in place under Centre 2000 was constructed in order to service the entire building, initial plans for which included a 45-unit seniors complex.

However, when the seniors complex did not end up being built, it opened up capacity within the existing system. The system is currently only hooked up to Centre 2000 and some have questioned why this system can not be hooked up to other developments in the downtown.

"So before, there was slow growth because there was no proper sewage, right? Well, they refuse to use a sewage [facility] that was in place," says Brianceau. "They say we need growth, but really the real driver is greed, and then the unspoken goal is to pave as much as you can get away with."

Michael Dehn, a mayoral candidate for Erin, told The Pointer that the development value triggered by the WWTF for

all the real estate developers is over \$4 billion in new home sales sprouting from the \$114 million dollar facility. The WWTF was [initially estimated to cost \\$65 million](#).

"Who's making the economic benefit? It's the developers," he said.

"I'm maybe not the perfect mayor, but I think I'm the most ethical candidate out there. And do I need the money? No, I have money from other jobs, and I don't have a piece of property that I'm going to segregate into nine or ten lots," he said, referencing a few other candidates who have publicly stated that they will benefit financially from either parts of or the entire implementation of the WWTF.

But as Brianceau points out, the effects of the facility will not only be felt in Erin. In fact, the majority of the effects will be felt by the ecosystems downstream.



'SAVE OUR TROUT' signs are seen scattered across the Town of Erin and downstream in Belfountain. Started by the [Erin Citizens Awareness Committee](#) when the facility was still in the planning phases, they have organized protests and information pamphlets to educate the community on the potential detrimental impacts to the river.

(Alexis Wright/The Pointer)

He made reference to the seven generation principle. Based on an ancient Haudenosaunee principle that asks whether the decisions made today will be sustainable for seven generations down the line.

"Do you think anybody's thinking [about the] seventh generation? No, they're destroying the generation right now," Brianceau said.

Dehn agrees.

"So as a community and for sustainability, you have to really not just worry about what's happening here, but what's happening to your neighbours uphill," he said.

Dehn is looking to change how politics have been done under the current mayor, who is not seeking re-election. Dehn, who ran against Ails in 2018 and came within just 210 votes, is a geologist and the CEO of two public 'eco-friendly' mining companies. He also started a green ammonia company six years ago with a sole focus of making an ammonia-based fertilizer. The business has since expanded to providing a number of services that are capable of completely replacing fossil fuels with greener alternatives.



Michael Dehn is currently running to be the Town of Erin's next mayor. He has raised a number of questions about the process that led to the wastewater treatment facility's approval.

(Alexis Wright/The Pointer)

Dehn knows there are much more environmentally-friendly options for Erin's wastewater than what is currently envisioned.

He studied under Professor Craig Jowett, PhD, in the Waterloo Centre for Groundwater Research at the University of Waterloo when Jowett patented the Waterloo Biofilter—an advanced onsite sewage system that uses foam-like materials and beneficial bacteria, and can be “reused onsite for purposes such as irrigation, truck washing or toilet flushing,” according to the company [website](#).

Erin currently has Waterloo Biofilters running in public buildings, including at Brisbane Public School, and Erin Centre 2000—the local community centre that also houses a medical centre, sports arena, library and the local high school.

“There is a Waterloo Biofilter system at Center 2000 that was designed for a senior's home plus the downtown core and it never got hooked up. So why was that not done?” Dehn said, echoing the same questions as Brianceau regarding the original plan for the Centre.

“Why it was never considered and why the developers are not forced to do a communal waste treatment plan for every new subdivision, which saves ripping up the roads, which saves the cost for all the existing homeowners who don't want to go on to this,” Dehn said. He criticized the town's insistence that the giant WWTF is necessary to replace aging septic systems, pointing out that a single spill from the new facility would dwarf any negative impacts currently being seen from leaking septic systems.



A Solmar Development Corp. subdivision will be the first to connect to the new wastewater system and work is currently underway to clear the lands for houses. The company was previously under a five year investigation for cutting down heritage trees in Niagara on the Lake. The charges were recently stayed due a delay in getting to trial.

(Alexis Wright/The Pointer)

Dehn has lived in the Village of Hillsburgh (which borders Erin to the north) for nearly 40 years and has personally witnessed the slow growth—up until now.

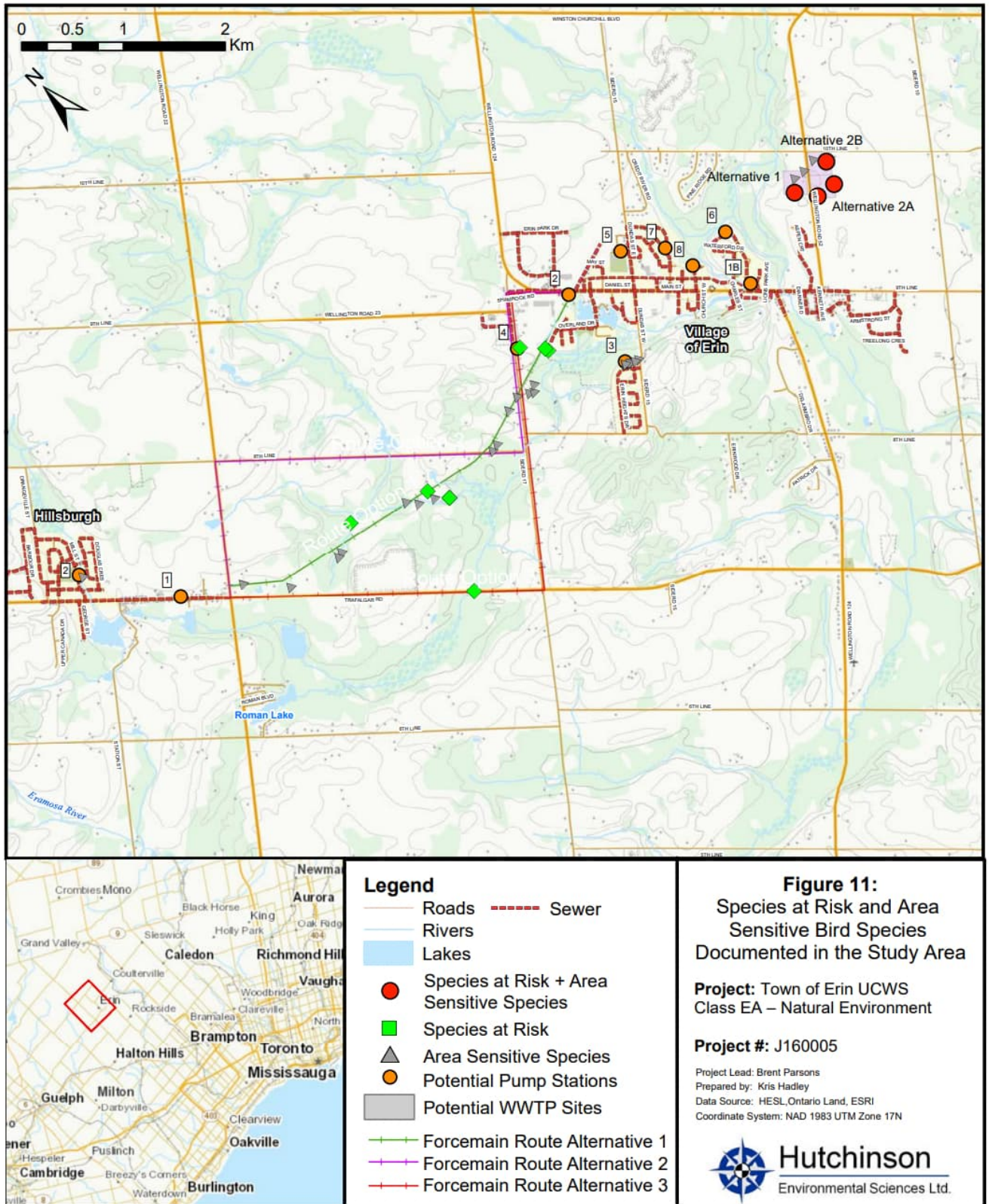
As of 2021, the population of the town centre according to Statistics Canada is [2,725](#). “We have to look at how to be sustainable not for the next four years, not for the next 40 years, but the next 400 years,” Dehn said.

According to [a town report](#), the population is expected to grow to 10,038 residents and Hillsburgh is expected to reach 5,770 by 2041 – an increase of 268 percent in less than 20 years.

“Why are we building so many homes all at once? Why have we not done an alternative? Why did we take money? Why [did it involve] backdoor deals? Why? There’s a lot of ‘whys’ and ‘the town needs to grow for the sake of growth’ isn’t a reason, and I don’t like not having answers,” Dehn said.

The residents outside of the town centre will continue to use their own water and waste systems, but those who reside within will eventually have to pay out-of-pocket to make the switch from septic to the newly constructed sewage pipelines that travel underneath a significant portion of the Elora-Cataract railway that goes through the town. The routing of this pipeline has faced a number of questions from residents.

The environmental assessment (EA) completed by Hutchinson Environmental Services recommended a change to the route of the main pipe planned to follow the railway. Despite recommendations, the Town decided to forgo the suggestion and picked a route that cut through a wilderness path where Hutchinson Environmental Services found a number of significant species including reptiles, amphibians, birds and mammals.



A myriad of sensitive species and Species At Risk reside along the proposed construction route for nearly all parts of the WTF that extend from north Hillsburgh all the way through the railways and Town of Erin to the east border where the discharge pipes are located.

(Hutchinson Environmental Services)

Where this pipeline ends and the effluent is deposited into the Credit River is where the most significant impacts to the Brook trout could be felt.

According to the Town of Erin and WSP, the effluent will be cooled to 19 degrees, which was deemed suitable by the EA.

MECP deemed 19 degrees was suitable based on monitoring of the river. According to MECP, further monitoring will be completed by the Town before the cooling system is designed.

CVC was satisfied these measures were sufficient to protect the Brook trout.

"Through the EA, Credit Valley Conservation Authority (CVC) provided recommendations for the implementation of cooling measures in the plant's design to minimize potential WWTP effluent temperature impacts on the receiving system," The CVC told The Pointer in an email statement. "CVC is satisfied that the required conditions of the Environmental Compliance Approval (ECA) will provide adequate mitigation measures to address potential impacts of the WWTP effluent on receiving systems to the extent feasible."

But questions are still being raised about the system, including the fact that at times it will not be operational unless temperature exceedances are recorded, which means effluent above the 19-degree threshold could find its way into the river.

"If 4-day moving average temperature exceeds 19 degrees Celsius, effluent cooling system shall be turned on to bring the effluent temperature to the objective of 19 degrees Celsius," states Nick Colucci, Director of Infrastructure with the Town of Erin.

The effluent will be cooled to 19°C which has been deemed suitable and suggested as per the approved environment assessment (EA).

The MECP Environmental Compliance Approval contains the following requirement in the adaptive management and contingency plan:

a. Temperature in the final effluent (measured at the outfall in manhole #10) shall always be maintained at or below the objective of 19 degrees Celsius (4-day moving average). If 4-day moving average temperature exceeds 19 degrees Celsius, effluent cooling system shall be turned on to bring the effluent temperature to the objective of 19 degrees Celsius (4-day moving average).

b. The Owner shall develop a plan for operation of the effluent cooling system, in consultation with CVC and the Ministry, to maintain the receiver temperature to support successful spawning, egg development and growth of Brook Trout, and include the plan in the operations manual.

In an email to The Pointer, Director of Infrastructure with the Town of Erin, Nick Colucci, states that part of the design of the cooling system – which is in compliance with the EA – includes letting the temperature reach above 19 degrees before turning it on.

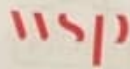
The design of the cooling system must be submitted to MECP prior to construction and no discharge can take place until the cooling system is built. MECP said they have yet to receive the design from the Town.

The CVC is also meant to receive the design after its completion according to the ECA. The Coalition for the West Credit River (CWCR) also requested the final designs in order to have a third-party consultant review them to ensure no detrimental harm will be caused to the trout.

Despite plans for this critical piece of the project remaining incomplete, construction has begun on certain parts of the facility.

Claiming to have taken all the proper steps and completed all the proper studies prior to construction, as most projects legally are required to according to provincial and federal law – the Town of Erin, along with WSP, sent out an extremely late notice to residents requesting their voluntary participation in a private well survey.

For WSP to know how to build the system to accurate specifications, and not from an estimation as they seemingly have made, this type of survey would have had to have been completed prior to designing the plans, let alone full blown construction. Properties that have a well will most likely have those wells affected by the new pipes being installed, and by the additional water the Town requires to supply the thousands of new homes and businesses, some of which are currently being built.



VOLUNTARY SHORT FORM PRIVATE WATER WELL SURVEY

September 15, 2022

Confidential

Subject: Voluntary Short Form Private Water Well Survey
Town of Erin Wastewater Servicing Project

Dear Resident / Property Owner:

WSP Canada Inc. (WSP) has been retained by The Town of Erin (Town) for construction environmental monitoring in support of the Town's construction of Wastewater Servicing infrastructure. The proposed work is anticipated to include the following:

- Approximately 10 kilometers of new sanitary sewer and / or forcemain, and six kilometers of watermain;
- A water main and sanitary sewer will be installed along Trafalgar Road in Hillsburgh from Church St. to the Elora-Cataract Trail crossing;
- The sanitary sewer will continue along the Elora-Cataract Trail from Trafalgar Road in Hillsburgh to Main St. in Erin;
- The water main will continue along the Elora-Cataract Trail from Trafalgar Road in Hillsburgh to the existing water main along Sideroad 17;
- The sanitary sewer will then continue along Main St. in Erin from the Elora-Cataract Trail to Water Street and to the Sewage Pumping Station located in Lion's Club Park; and
- From the Sewage Pumping Station, a twin forcemain will continue along Main St. and Wellington Road 52, to the Water Resource Recovery Facility on the north side of Wellington Road 52, 400 m west of 10th Line.

A map of the proposed wastewater servicing infrastructure is provided below, **Figure A**.

582 Lakeshore Street West
Kitchener, ON
Canada N2W 1M3
T: +1 519 743-6776

T: WSP.com
wsp.com
WSP Ref: 211-04277

Dated September 15, 2022, WSP and the Town delivered this notice to residents within the settlement area. As these plans have been in the works for years, it's unclear why they waited until three-and-a-half months after breaking ground at the WRRF to send this notice for a critical survey.

(Provided)

[According to MECP guidelines](#), to ensure water levels of any private wells have not been affected, a follow up study is required. It's unclear if this follow-up will be completed, or what happens if someone declines to take part, or did not answer within the month. Unless they seek out a private contractor to do the survey, the resident is at risk of being forced to connect to not only the sewage line, but town water as well.

Residents of Erin claim they have not been kept in the loop.

The Town of Erin initially did not have a WWTF as part of their Official Plan (OP). In July, a motion was moved to amend the OP to "confirm future growth in each of the Hillsburgh and Erin Urban Centres on a proportionate basis to 2041; and update the Official Plan policies regarding growth management".

Residents were given 20 days to make an appeal to the amended bylaw. The bylaw was passed on July 7, but the notice to residents is dated July 18.

Pearson said that by the time he went to his mailbox and got the notice, he only had three business days to make an appeal—not enough time to get a lawyer to draft a review.

Pearson claims that the Town is hiding everything in bylaws, rezoning and forcing people to connect to the system.

"Well, you can't stop it, but you can build it right, and you might also look at not putting Hillsburgh on it, depending on me," Dehn said. "I don't really have a clear picture of how much money we've got from the new Hillsburgh developments. The area of those developments are bigger than the ones in Erin."

Both Dehn and Pearson made reference to safer and more eco-friendly options that the Town could have decided to choose for the effluent. The lands surrounding the WRRF and the discharge pipe have multiple gravel pits and lots of farmland where the effluent could be safely irrigated across fields and naturally filter through the ground into the aquifer before going back into the river, or be reused in the gravel pits for things like washing gravel. Both alternatives were ignored by Town council.

Public statements by the current mayor claimed a significant amount of money for the project would come from the Province, though according to other media reports they secured just \$3.6 million so far. The Town has said it is looking for provincial assistance that could help residents pay for the initial cost to hook-up to the new system.

"Is it coming out of the millions of dollars that the developers kicked in, or is it coming out of the taxpayers' money?"

- With files from Natasha O'Neill

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