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## Metering:: [Final Edition]

Boei, William. **The Vancouver Sun** [Vancouver, B.C.] 26 Aug 2004: B2.

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### Abstract (summary)

West Vancouver, Surrey, Maple Ridge, Richmond and North Vancouver require metering for new homes. West Vancouver, Surrey, Richmond and Delta are retrofitting existing homes with meters. Vancouver council will consider a program in the fall.

(West Vancouver Councillor Victor Durman, who chairs the regional district's finance committee, is a proponent of the Harrison Lake option. [Derek Corrigan] isn't. "Victor is absolutely determined that all that clean water is destined for the toilet bowls of West Vancouver," Corrigan grins.)

Color Photo: Steve Bosch, Vancouver Sun / The Coal Harbour water park: Some say we are using more than our share of one of the planet's most precious resources.; Color Photo: Associated Press File Photo / Water wasted? Will residential meters help prevent shortages during the dry summer months?; Color Photo: Ward Perrin, Vancouver Sun / Water flows over the Cleveland Dam. Water is dumped over the reservoirs for 10 months of the year.; Table: GVRD/ Vancouver Sun/Local municipalities / THE PRICE OF FRESH WATER: How much we pay and how much we use: (See hard copy for complete table.)

### Full Text

does it hold water?: While the ecologically minded push for metering, opponents say it won't solve summer shortages

We're the Saudi Arabia of fresh water, here in the rainforest. We're practically swimming in it.

But are we living in a fool's paradise? Are we using more than our share of one of the planet's most precious resources? And isn't it time we all got water meters installed so we can begin to conserve, and water-wasters will finally be forced to pay?

Yes indeed, say the ecologically minded, who on this issue include Vancouver Councillor Fred Bass, Surrey Mayor Doug McCallum and University of Victoria researcher Oliver Brandes.

No, not necessarily, says Burnaby Mayor Derek Corrigan, the chairman of the Greater Vancouver Regional District's water committee.

Brandes, who has written a series of reports on water demand management for UVic's Polis Project on Ecological Governance, says unmetered water is an invitation to overindulge.

"You pay a flat rate, you don't really care how much you use," he said from Victoria. "You start sweeping your driveway with a hose or something like that."

Brandes called metering "a critical requirement" for curbing water use and found it "a shocking shame" that Canada is far behind western Europe and the U.S. with only about 55 per cent of homes metered.

"We've got the lowest price of water around, and we're water hogs," added Bass, who will be pushing for a Vancouver home- metering program this fall.

"In the future, water is going to be gold," McCallum said. "I think we take it for granted here, and we need to start to look at conserving it and encouraging our residents not only to conserve water, but also to save money."

Surrey started a voluntary metering program last year that will eventually become mandatory, and expects to have every home metered in five to seven years.

But Corrigan can't see the need.

"We've got water coming out of our ears. We're dumping water over the reservoirs for 10 months of the year."

Corrigan says he's all for conservation, but spending big money on a universal metering program won't accomplish it.

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It's a debate that won't go away soon. It may fade as the autumn rains fill the reservoirs. But it will be back next summer when the sun beats down on the city's beaches again and the next round of lawn-watering restrictions begins.

We do use a lot of water in Greater Vancouver, in the neighbourhood of 350 litres per person per day, and that's counting only residential use. That's a little over the Canadian average of 326 litres, compared with 250 to 300 litres a day for the U.S., 149 for the U.K. and 128 for Germany.

In 2001, the last time anyone calculated local residential water use, there was a bewildering range. New Westminster used an average of only 197 litres per person per day, lowest in the region. West Vancouver topped all municipalities at 536 litres, Burnaby used 321, Vancouver 315 and Surrey 312.

But those numbers are estimates. Without metering, you can't be sure where the water goes.

About 40 per cent of the region's water use is metered, including most of the larger industrial, commercial and institutional connections. About two-thirds of municipalities meter multi-unit residential buildings.

Single-family homes are a patchwork. Only three areas -- Langley City, White Rock and the University Endowment Lands -- have every home metered. No usage figures are available

for White Rock and the UEL, but Langley City residents use 232 litres per person per day. The surrounding District of Langley, which is not metered, uses an estimated 418 litres.

West Vancouver, Surrey, Maple Ridge, Richmond and North Vancouver require metering for new homes. West Vancouver, Surrey, Richmond and Delta are retrofitting existing homes with meters. Vancouver council will consider a program in the fall.

Elsewhere, municipalities that convert to metering report drops of 10 to 40 per cent in residential water use, although it's not clear whether usage stays down in the long run without additional incentives.

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"We live in the Saudi Arabia of water," Bass said. "That doesn't mean we should be spendthrift with it. We have to look at ourselves as citizens of the planet."

In a planetary context, environmentalists view a single-family home on a big lot, paying a low flat fee for unlimited water, as a grotesque anomaly.

It's also unfair, Bass said. "Why should the person who is very responsible in conserving water pay the same as the person who is being very irresponsible and wasting water?"

"I think the sooner we get to metering, the better."

Metered water can be priced incrementally so that the more you use, the more you pay on a volume basis. That will encourage alternatives, Bass argued, such as collecting rain water for gardening and finding ways to use "grey" water from sinks and showers.

As our climate becomes increasingly Mediterranean -- more summer heat, less rain -- we may also have to revise our ideal of lush temperate-zone gardens and look at plants and landscaping approaches that work with less water, Brandes said.

Volume-based pricing and water-saving incentives are elements of demand-side management, and Brandes says that makes more sense than increasing the supply of water, which comes with "a host of ecological impacts."

But you can't manage what you can't measure. Without meters, you can't tell where the water goes. In most municipal systems, for example, 10 per cent or more of water is simply lost. With meters, you can trace where it's going, find and repair broken mains or track down water thieves.

Brandes acknowledges that money is a stumbling block. It's expensive to retrofit a city with meters -- the ballpark estimate for Greater Vancouver is \$130 million to \$170 million -- and, "when it comes time to lay down the dollars, sometimes people get cold feet."

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The regional district studied the pros and cons of universal water metering in 1996, again in 1999, and for a third time last year.

The first two studies underestimated the benefits of metering, regional demand-side manager Nancy Knight said in last year's review. Unfortunately, they also underestimated the cost of installing meters; as a result, there is no strong, measurable advantage to spending the money.

In any case, Knight suggested, universal metering might not be the most effective way to reduce demand.

Metering works best in conjunction with pricing strategies, toilet retrofit programs, public education programs, and so on. Metering alone may reduce water use by only about 10 per cent.

"If fiscal resources are limited," Knight wrote, "it may be preferable to secure demand reductions in the near term through financial incentive programs (e.g. toilet rebates) . . . and leave universal water metering as a longer-term objective."

One reason the region isn't in a spending mood is that it is already pouring \$600 million into a water filtration plant that is pushing water charges for the average homeowner up by \$65 a year.

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Those reservoirs in the North Shore watersheds overflow for much of the winter, and every June they are filled to the brim. Metering every home and reducing water use from fall to summer can't make them any fuller.

"The reality is that we are only short of water for a very short period of time every year," Corrigan said. "In July and August and sometimes into September, we've got a problem."

Watering restrictions during the dry months solve the problem, he said, and without much impact on the population.

Installing meters in every home might save homeowners some money and reduce water use. But we would still have to pay for the meters and for our existing water infrastructure and operating costs.

And we'd still have to restrict watering, Corrigan said, because we won't save enough water by metering to cover the extra demand in the dry months. "Even if we have water metering, we'll still have shortages of water in the summer."

So where will our future drinking water come from, either in reduced use or increased supply? The options boil down to:

- Universal metering, which could ease the load for most of the year, but won't solve the summer shortage.
- Increasing the flow from Coquitlam Lake. It holds plenty of water, but most of it is controlled by BC Hydro for power generation. The district is negotiating for a bigger share, but it may be years before anything happens.
- Building a pipeline from Harrison Lake, another vast supply of fresh water. But the lake is at sea level, and it would be expensive to pump its water to the city.

(West Vancouver Councillor Victor Durman, who chairs the regional district's finance committee, is a proponent of the Harrison Lake option. Corrigan isn't. "Victor is absolutely determined that all that clean water is destined for the toilet bowls of West Vancouver," Corrigan grins.)

- Damming another lake in the Seymour watershed for additional storage. That's the preferred option, Corrigan says, but it's way down the road.

"Right now, the staff is telling me that our [existing] water supply, if we look after the problems we have in the summer, should be sufficient for what we need for the next 50 years."

He adds, combatively, that the filtration plant will improve our drinking water from merely wonderful to "the cleanest in the world. We should be looking to market that to water-

intensive industries. For 10 months of the year, we can give you as much water as you want."

Meanwhile, he says, the region will maintain a low profile on metering and keep an eye on how municipal programs work out.

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Surrey is getting 350 to 400 households a month signing up for water meters. The city pays -- it's a \$9-million program included \$6 million in federal-provincial infrastructure grants -- and McCallum expects participants to save about 15 per cent on their water bills while reducing usage by 20 per cent.

However, Surrey is growing so fast its total water usage will keep rising and the city is looking for additional sources, including artesian wells that provide pure drinking water at less cost than the GVRD charges.

"We're trying to build a city that respects the environment and respects water," McCallum said, adding that he regrets the region's lack of urgency.

"I believe very strongly that we should have water metering throughout the GVRD, and I think we need to really push to do it and to conserve water," he said.

"Whatever water you use, you should pay for."

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#### Illustration

Color Photo: Steve Bosch, Vancouver Sun / The Coal Harbour water park: Some say we are using more than our share of one of the planet's most precious resources.; Color Photo: Associated Press File Photo / Water wasted? Will residential meters help prevent shortages during the dry summer months?; Color Photo: Ward Perrin, Vancouver Sun / Water flows over the Cleveland Dam. Water is dumped over the reservoirs for 10 months of the year.; Table: GVRD/ Vancouver Sun/Local municipalities / THE PRICE OF FRESH WATER: How much we pay and how much we use: (See hard copy for complete table.)

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## Indexing (details)

<b>People</b>	Bass, Fred, McCallum, Doug, Brandes, Oliver, Corrigan, Derek, Knight, Nancy
<b>Title</b>	Metering:: [Final Edition]
<b>Author</b>	Boei, William
<b>Publication title</b>	The Vancouver Sun
<b>Pages</b>	B2
<b>Number of pages</b>	0
<b>Publication year</b>	2004
<b>Publication date</b>	Aug 26, 2004
<b>Year</b>	2004
<b>column</b>	The Daily Special
<b>Section</b>	WestCoast News
<b>Publisher</b>	Infomart, a division of Postmedia Network Inc.
<b>Place of publication</b>	Vancouver, B.C.
<b>Country of publication</b>	Canada
<b>Publication subject</b>	General Interest Periodicals--Canada
<b>ISSN</b>	08321299
<b>Source type</b>	Newspapers
<b>Language of publication</b>	English
<b>Document type</b>	Column
<b>ProQuest document ID</b>	242296779
<b>Document URL</b>	<a href="http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/docview/242296779?accountid=14846">http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/docview/242296779?accountid=14846</a>
<b>Copyright</b>	(Copyright Vancouver Sun 2004)
<b>Last updated</b>	2010-06-11
<b>Database</b>	2 databases View list