

Water hook-up comes with a steep cost in Horseshoe Valley

'I think they're catering to the developers that are coming in and we shouldn't be paying for it,' says Oro-Medonte homeowner forced to pay \$9,300 for water hookup

about an hour ago By: [Jessica Owen](#)



(Pixabay)

When Valerie Thornton and her husband John were slapped with a \$9,300 bill to be connected to Oro-Medonte Township's municipal water system in December 2019, they were shocked.

As far as they knew, they were already connected to the municipal system, and had been since they bought their home on Birch Grove Drive in 2004.

The Thorntons, along with other residents in Horseshoe Valley's Zone 1 area, have been working with township officials since December as part of a task force to determine who actually owns their water system and, therefore, who's responsible to absorb the cost of now connecting it to the township's new Zone 2 system, which was completed this year.

"I strongly feel developers should be paying this, not us. We don't need any more water. I think they're catering to the developers that are coming in and we shouldn't be paying for it," said Valerie.

As the system has existed since long before Oro and Medonte merged in 1994, much of the historic documentation about the system – which is estimated to have been built in the 1960s – is difficult to find and nail down.

The township says its position is it is owned by Skyline Horseshoe Resort. Some residents say they have evidence the system is owned by the municipality or, at the very least, is a public/private hybrid model.

Since lawyers have been called in to sort it out, much of the historic evidence is considered protected by attorney-client privilege and isn't being released to the public.

There are approximately 450 homes, and around 1,000 residents, living in Zone 1. About half live in condominiums. Some are newer builds that are less than six years old, while some are older.

"When we first got our water bills (starting in 2004), they said nothing on them about Skyline," said Valerie. "You never really look at water bills; you just get them and you pay them."

Valerie shared with *Barrie Today* a sampling of water bills she and her husband have received over their years of home ownership. They are all sent from the Township of Oro-Medonte. She also shared her home's original listing from 2004, where it specifically indicates her home is on a municipal water system.

In the couple's July 2008 bill was the first mention of Horseshoe Resort, which was added to a bill in small print at the bottom and only mentions that inquires about water should be directed to the resort.

Mention of Skyline and the privatized system first appeared on the couple's water bills in 2017. Notations changed again in November 2018 adding more language about the water system being private.

In November 2019, township council met to discuss the Zone 1 integration plan. At that meeting, councillors voted to share information with Zone 1 users on a plan to hook them up to the municipal water system and offer them an opportunity to provide feedback.

A flyer sent through the mail around Christmas was the first time the Thorntons remember hearing about the plan, as well as the \$9,300 fee to be connected to the new system.

“We were dumbfounded,” said Valerie. “We felt we needed to find out more about what this was all about. It’s hard to make comments when you don’t really understand what’s going on.”

Neighbours started getting together to discuss the issue at the beginning of this year, participating in a focus group with township staff, which eventually became a task force. While many members worked at getting the township to reduce the amount they would be charged to connect, one member, Tim Taylor, started digging deeper.

Taylor discovered township documents dating back as far as the 1960s that called into question whether the system was truly privately owned. He also interviewed former staffers, developers and anyone he could find who was involved in the original installation of the water system, and found that there was plenty of conflicting information on exactly how the system was set up and who owned it.

Taylor compiled a 260-page report of his findings and supplied it to council.

“Once we delved really into it, we found Skyline is supplying water and maintaining the system under contract from the municipality. So it’s not a private system. It’s a municipal system,” said John Thornton.

‘THERE ARE A LOT OF NEW HOMES...’

Mayor Harry Hughes acknowledges there are differing viewpoints on whether the Zone 1 water system has always been municipally or privately owned.

“There are a lot of different opinions on whether things were always private or aren’t, and that’s what this debate is all about. I understand the confusion that’s around it,” he said. “The township’s position is that it’s private now.”

Hughes clarified that, as some of the information on the issue was discussed in-camera at the council table and there is pending litigation, he was not in a position to provide some answers.

When asked why this is an issue coming to the forefront now, Hughes said the township had heard from residents for years that they wanted to be hooked up to the municipal system.

“This goes back to 2012, when there was a movement to be able to hook the Zone 1 people up to the system. At that time, there was no capacity there to be able to do it. So, the

township drilled a well. The township needed to do a fair amount of capital investment to hook them up," Hughes said.

"The people in Horseshoe Valley have been asking for a long time to be relieved of having to be on the service of Skyline," the mayor added.

John Thornton disputes that the residents requested the integration.

"It's never been the residents. It's always been the developers," he said.

As the Horseshoe/Craighurst corridor is planned to expand with new development, Hughes said the township has been proactive in making sure new infrastructure is in place.

"There's a lot of new development. The new development is going to be paying a substantial portion. There are a lot of new homes coming there," Hughes said.

Preliminary steps completed over the last number of years toward Zone 1 integration included the construction of a new well and water storage reservoirs in Zone 2. The construction project was completed in the spring of 2020; however, the valve to connect it to Zone 1 is currently closed.

"We weren't saying 'We're hooking you up.' We're saying, there's an opportunity for them to hook up. We wanted to determine what the cost would be for them to hook up that would be fair to the rest of residents who are on the municipal water systems," said Hughes.

Paul Mondell, of Skyline Utility Services, provided the company's stance on the issue this week.

"We would like to get many of our current customers off of our private system and onto a municipal system," Mondell said. "You can imagine the risk and liability that's associated with this. There are many issues related to public safety that have to be looked at. Water safety is a critical issue.

"Even though it's a private system, it's managed and operated like a public one with managers and operators," he added. "Ultimately, Skyline doesn't want to be an operator of water. It's in the long-term (best) interest of everybody to go to a full municipal system."

Mondell said no money is changing hands between the township and Skyline to have the municipality take over the system.

"There's no financial transaction here," he said.

Overall, the Thorntons really just want the definitive truth on the matter.

"The No. 1 thing we want is the truth. If it genuinely is a private system and they can prove it, then we could pay something to be connected. Then, the only thing we'd have to do is negotiate a price. On the other hand, if we're on a municipal system, they can't charge us a connection fee," said John.

“I think (councillors are) thinking that if we don’t pay, then all the rest of the township is going to have to pay, but that’s not the truth,” added Valerie. “We’ll pay for meters... but all the pipes are already in. It’s not like it’s a whole new system.”

At its July 22 meeting, council unanimously voted to reduce the hook-up fee per household to \$7,347.30 to be amortized over 25 years, or a reduced one-time payment of \$7,107.30.

Residents of Zone 1 are now being asked through a survey sent via registered letter to all residents, whether they want to be hooked up to the system. The survey must be completed by Friday, Aug. 28.

The Thorntons, along with other Zone 1 residents, have started a GoFundMe campaign to fund a court challenge. As of this week, around 110 people have donated \$20,000 to the cause, with the final goal being \$100,000. For more information on how to donate, [click here](#).

“You don’t raise this much money from people if they don’t care. They care and they’re up in arms,” said John.



About the Author: Jessica Owen

Jessica Owen brings nine years of experience to her role as regional reporter for Village Media, primarily covering county matters, court, Collingwood and Barrie matters

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