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WESTERN WHEEL

JANUARY 28, 2009 VOL. 34 NO. 26

\$1.00 INCL

Air quality key issue for residents



Turner Valley resident Lynn Cellars, left, speaks to Lionhead Engineering representative Karen Mather about oil and gas activity in Turner Valley while Perry Huber, also with Lionhead Engineering, and Dave Gower, with Alberta Environment look on. photo by Tamara Neely

**BY TAMARA NEELY
STAFF REPORTER**

The question of what is being released into the air in Turner Valley emerged as a primary concern at an oil and gas open house last week.

Alberta's ministry of Culture and Community Spirit spearheaded an open house at the Flare 'n' Derrick Community Hall on Jan. 20 to provide information about its activities at the old gas plant, which it manages for the Province, as well as activities of two oil companies – Talisman and Conoco Phillips – operating in the area.

The ministry's contract engineering company presented information to the public about an old sour gas well it plans to shut down to current standards. Connected to the well is a flare that burns both naturally migrating gas and gas from the well. The flare is a remnant from the area's historic past, a continuously burning flame that has some people wondering what it may be emitting into the air.

Turner Valley resident Lynn Cellars attended the open house to seek information about air-quality testing. She said the five organizations present at the open house

Snow blows away plowing funds

**BY DON PATTERSON
STAFF REPORTER**

Okotoks' snowy day fund, intended to address massive snowfalls, has been completely drained since winter blew in with a bang in December.

The Town has used nearly \$39,000 in snow removal funds to clear the snow from Okotoks streets that fell in December. However, council created a new \$50,000 buffer in case the heavy snowfall continues. "It's an extraordinary occurrence from a weather point of view. We have not seen levels of snowfall like this since the 1970s. We received almost two feet of snow from Dec. 7 to the end of the year," said Okotoks municipal manager Rick Quail.

Each year the Town budgets just over \$200,000 for snow removal, including \$4,400 to contract out services if necessary. The Town also had a \$34,500 fund to deal with emergency events.

Quail said the Town was able to cover snow removal operations in December with the remaining 2008 budget, however, the massive amounts forced it to dip into both contingency funds.

Council beefed up its emergency snow removal fund on Monday to the tune of \$50,000 and approved drawing money from surpluses accumulated in recent years to refill the account.

He said it's extremely rare for the Town to have to use both its emergency fund and the amount budgeted for private contractors. "There was no choice because of the volume of snow, the warm weather, priority routes and making sure we got the snow removed around the schools in a timely fashion," said Quail.

He said the situation was made worse by rising temperatures that started to melt the snow and was followed by cold weather that froze packed snow on the roads.

According to Quail, the Town has to base its budgets for services such as snow removal on historic demand.

Coun. Ed Sands said the Town is lucky that it doesn't get heavy snowfall each year but it does get chinooks in the winter months.

"We're used to fairly small snowfall events, followed almost immediately by a chinook which melts most of the snow," he said. "This is the longest term accumulation of snow I have seen since the '70s, and it's bitten us."

Sands said it's difficult for the Town to decide how far it will go to clear snow from the roads.

He said it's costly to physically remove all snow and, if it creates a massive reserve fund for snow removal, the money could sit unused for years.

The Town should watch what happens over at least another winter before deciding to purchase a large snow plow for roads in town, said Sands.

Sands suggested creating a multi-purpose emergency fund that could be used for a range of events such as snowfall, flooding or high winds

— the engineering company, two oil companies, two industry regulatory agencies and the area’s emergency services organization — could not provide information about whether regular testing was being conducted in Turner Valley.

“Anything that is of concern to the public, to people living in the neighbourhood that has to do with environmental issues, the regulatory bodies should be able to answer these questions,” said Cellars. “But they really passed the buck to Talisman.

“I think it’s great that Talisman can (provide information), but they’re not an independent party.” Cellars said the Talisman representatives were helpful and offered to meet with her and test the air by her house. However, she said she would like answers from an organization that is not making money directly from the activity.

“They (oil companies) make decisions based on putting food on the table and the public’s interest is just one of their concerns, not the main concern,” said Cellars. Cellars said she would like to see regular testing take place since the air in the river valley where she lives often carries a scent. She said continuous testing, rather than spot testing would provide results on accumulative emissions rather than emissions at one point in time.

Turner Valley chief administrative officer Stan Ogrodniczuk said the air in Turner Valley is not monitored regularly, rather, it is tested when the Town or residents are concerned.

“We don’t do air testing. That’s not required by law,” said Ogrodniczuk. “The last time there was an air test was last year — it came out five times better than Calgary.

“The bottom line is it was very safe.”

An air test was prompted, Ogrodniczuk said, because Town representatives and some residents noticed an abnormal smell. The Town called Alberta Environment and technicians were dispatched to monitor the air.

“(The smell was a result of) when Conoco Phillips was cleaning up a site and organics and whatever else was in there,” said Ogrodniczuk. “Right now we’re not doing anything because we’ve never had problems with it.”

The air will be monitored while Lionhead Engineering, the company contracted to do the re-abandonment of the Royalite (Dingman) #2 well at the site of the old gas plant, conducts its work.

Kary Cuthill, president of Lionhead, said during the approximately month-long abandonment process there will be three fixed air-monitoring units around the perimeter of the work and a mobile unit will also be used to sample the air.



A massive pile of snow and ice on Cimarron Way is about to be cleared away on Tuesday morning. Work to remove heavy snowfall on Okotoks streets since winter arrived in December has exhausted the Town’s emergency snow removal funds.
photo by Don Patterson

In this issue...

[Editorial](#)

[Paul's Place](#)

[News](#)

[Sports](#)

[Entertainment](#)

[Classified Ads](#)

[Business & Professional Directories](#)

investment recreational and retirement **PROPERTIES** spring 2008

[Foothills Visitor Guide Directory](#)

Special Anniversary



Foothills Country Hospice celebrates one year

[See News](#)

Get in the Act



Okotoks trailing in green challenge

[See News](#)

[Front Page](#)

[Sports](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[News Stories](#)

[Classifieds](#)

[Archives](#)

[Editorial](#)

[Business & Prof Directories](#)

[Links](#)

Published Wednesdays at Okotoks, Alberta, Canada. Serving the communities of Okotoks, Aldersyde, Black Diamond, DeWinton, Longview, Millarville, Priddis, Turner Valley, Bragg Creek, and the rural ratepayers of the M.D. of Foothills. And now the World. Established August 3, 1976.