


Fix needed 'sooner rather than later,' for Williams Lake's falling water level, says area councillor

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 A drone photo shows the the low level of water at Williams Lake in Halifax on Wednesday, Sept. 9, 2020..

A drone photo shows the the low level of water at Williams Lake in Halifax on Wednesday, Sept. 9, 2020. - Tim Krochak



HALIFAX, N.S. — Water levels at one of Halifax's favourite swimming spots have dropped perilously low in this hot, dry summer as new development diverts H2O from Williams Lake and a leak under a dam allows it to flow into the sea.

The city and the Nature Conservancy of Canada split the \$6.6 million they paid the Shaw Group three years ago for 154 hectares of wilderness that include Colpitt and half of Williams lakes. The province and the feds also kicked in money to maintain what's now called the Shaw Wilderness Park.

"What I see looking out my window are mudflats with ... a very small pond of water. Then there's kind of a rivulet that goes through the mud to the eastern end," said Murray Coolican, who has lived beside the western edge of Williams Lake for a dozen years.



Rocks bear the marks of the receding water level at Williams Lake in Halifax on Wednesday, Sept. 9, 2020.. - Tim Krochak

"We've had summers with low water levels before, but never as low as this," he said Thursday. "This is the first year that we've had total mudflats off our property."

There are often too many weeds to swim near his home, so he normally kayaks out into the lake before taking a dip. But that hasn't happened lately.

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The kayaks "are doing duty at the moment on our lakeside trying to keep the deer away, but they're not much use for kayaking these days," said Coolican, a former deputy minister of energy with the province, who heads the Williams Lake Conservation Company, a non-profit community organization

established in 1968 that describes its mandate as promoting the health of Williams Lake and its watershed for the benefit of all.

"The city has invested a fair amount of money, and the provincial and the federal governments made an investment in creating the Shaw Wilderness Park and there are a lot of community members who donated money through the Nature Conservancy to create the wilderness park. And one of the prime features of the marketing was Williams Lake as a part of it and access to the lake," he said.

"We don't want it to get to a point where it's just another dead, urban lake."

"If it is lost in greater measure than it is now, I think that would make the investment made a lot less. It wouldn't be the jewel in the crown of conservation lands in this area."

The water level has dropped about 130 centimetres since late May, said Melanie Dobson, a retired geneticist who lives beside the lake and has measured its changes since 2002.

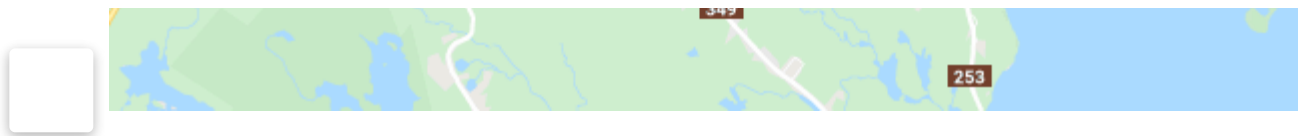
"We're really at the low level," Dobson said, noting drops were similar in 2016 and 2018.

What do those three record-breaking years have in common? Very little rain, she said.

"It's absolutely predictable that for one centimetre of rain, Williams Lake goes up by three centimetres," Dobson said. "But it evaporates in the summer at least two centimetres a day if there's no rain."

Halifax West-Armdale Coun. Shawn Cleary has fielded calls this week about the falling water level at Williams Lake.





"We don't want it to get to a point where it's just another dead, urban lake," Cleary said. "We need the health of the water to provide a great environment for all the stuff that lives in it and lives around it and depends on it."

Hundreds of new houses built uphill in Spryfield at developments including Governor's Brook have reduced the amount of precipitation that reaches Williams Lake, he said.

"Because you've got a modern stormwater system up there, a lot of the water that used to just fall as rain and then end up in Colpitt, which would go down and feed Williams, isn't happening as much," Cleary said.

To compound the problem, a leak under the old dam on a water course called Lawson's Brook that leads from Williams Lake to the Northwest Arm is getting progressively worse, he said.

"Hopefully in the next couple of years we can really address the issue."

"If you're getting less water filling up the lake and you get more water draining out of the lake, the level goes down much more," Cleary said.

He wants to ask city staff for an engineering study to address the problem by plugging the area that's leaking near the dam.

"Especially now that we own the Shaw Wilderness Park on the undeveloped side of Williams Lake, we have a vested interest in making sure the lake is maintained and healthy," Cleary said.

A fix won't come fast, he said. "Hopefully in the next couple of years we can really address the issue."

Someone tried repairing the problem more than 30 years ago, he said.

"They kind of put concrete down in front of the dam to try to plug the hole and, of course, that's lifted up and it's leaking again pretty badly," Cleary said.

He's "moderately concerned" about the falling water level.

"We are having a rather dry summer and so one would expect it to be bad, but I don't think it should be as bad as it is and I think we need to look at and address the leakage under the dam sooner rather than later," Cleary said.

He doesn't know how much the fix will cost. "I've heard people ballpark it could be anything from a couple hundred grand to half a million."

Linda Campbell, senior research fellow in aquatic ecosystem health at Saint Mary's University, isn't so sure fixing the dam will help.

"It is a very dry lake. The water levels are quite low and are similar to what we've seen elsewhere. It looks more than just management of water inflows and outflows," Campbell said after examining an aerial photo of the lake shot this week.

"It is very possible that climate change is accelerating the changes in water levels. Very old dams were not designed with climate change patterns in place."

To come up with a solution, it's important to figure out what the dam was designed for, she said. "Lakes are a bit more complex than bathtubs because there are multiple sources of water input and multiple sources of water output, so a holistic hydrological approach needs to be used to better understand the overall impacts of those factors."

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