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CP Story

Informal probe into Walkerton E. coli outbreak begins

COLIN PERKEL

WALKERTON, Ont. (CP) - About 120 water-weary residents filled a community hall just outside town Wednesday evening to tell the man charged with probing the tragedy about the havoc wreaked on the town.

"Our community is grieving," Beth Conroy told Justice Dennis O'Connor, who is heading a commission of inquiry into the E. coli outbreak.

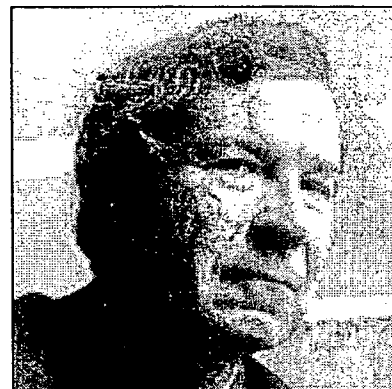
Conroy talked about the "exhaustion, pain and grief" visited on the community and its "loss of innocence."

"Some will never again trust the water from their taps, even after all this is done," she said.

O'Connor acknowledged the hurt and suffering and promised the inquiry, which begins formal hearings in October, will move as quickly and thoroughly as possible.

By the end of the process, he said, people will be satisfied "that the inquiry got to the bottom of it and that no stone was left unturned."

On Wednesday, the chief coroner lowered the official death count from the E. coli tragedy to six people from seven.



Mr. Justice Dennis O'Connor, commissioner of the Walkerton Inquiry, photographed in his office in Toronto, Ont. on July 17. (CP/Aaron Harris)

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Four people died as a direct result of the E. coli outbreak, the coroner's office said. And the bacteria was a contributing factor in two other deaths.

At least 2,000 others in this community of 5,000 were sickened after a deadly strain of E. coli made its way into the town's water system in mid-May.

In Toronto, the province picked an insurance adjuster well-experienced in natural disasters to handle the town's compensation claims.

Attorney General Jim Flaherty announced on Wednesday that the province's multimillion-dollar Walkerton Compensation Plan for claims of pain and suffering in the small farming town would be handled by the independent firm Crawford Adjusters Canada.

Crawford has handled claims in recent disasters such as the 1998 Winnipeg floods, Montreal's ice storm and the 1985 tornado in Barrie, Ont.

The provincial compensation plan is designed to provide those who suffered injury or loss with the same level of compensation that they could expect to receive in the courts, but faster, said Flaherty.

"Crawford has earned a reputation for fairness, sensitivity and efficiency in responding to critical situations. We are delighted the company has accepted this important assignment," he said.

"This isn't about legal liability," he added. "It's about doing the right thing."

If the compensation offer is declined, an impartial mediator will then work with the two sides to find a solution. If that fails, the claim can also be taken to binding arbitration with the province paying all "reasonable" legal expenses.

But Hamilton lawyer Ted Stayshyn said a court settlement would be the best process to help those affected by the tainted water.

"The people of Walkerton, justifiably so, do not trust what the government has done in the past," said Stayshyn, who works with one of the six firms that have joined forces to launch a class-action suit on behalf of hundreds of residents.

Stayshyn said Walkerton residents want to ensure they don't give up any future rights by quickly signing a settlement with the province.

"When you are asking people to give up their rights to sue in court when the water has not even been approved as safe, it seems quite a bit premature," he said.

Earlier this week, Ontario's environment ministry ordered that 3.5 kilometres of rust-encrusted water pipes in Walkerton be torn up and replaced within seven weeks.

Residents in town have been without tap water for more than two months and must get their drinking water shipped in from elsewhere.

On Wednesday, the province said water sampling teams would begin travelling house-to-house in order to ensure the bacteria had been flushed from the entire system.

Environment Minister Dan Newman said the detailed testing was important to restore confidence in the water supply.

But in Toronto, NDP leader Howard Hampton said the government needed to put an immediate cash injection into the water systems throughout Ontario.

"As unbelievable as it sounds, there is no program to help smaller towns absorb the costs of rehabilitating water mains and wells," said Hampton.

And he said that Walkerton's old water pipes were just "the tip of the iceberg."

So far, government payouts arising from the tainted-water crisis are close to \$400,000. Along with the compensation program, Ontario has pledged emergency financial relief to cover water-related out-of-pocket expenses and fixed costs.

There is also help for local businesses who were plunged into an instant recession by the water-borne plague and a pledge by the province to do whatever it takes to ensure that Walkerton residents have access to a safe, clean water supply.

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