

An Evaluation of a Free Residential Home Plumbing Inspection Program

Date:	January 19, 2009
To:	Planning and Growth Management Committee
From:	General Manager, Toronto Water
Wards:	All
Reference Number:	P:\2009\Cluster B\TW\pg09003

SUMMARY

The Planning and Growth Management Committee requested that the General Manager Toronto Water, in consultation with the Chief Building Official, report to the Committee on the costs of a free home plumbing inspection program for residential owners engaged in minor home plumbing projects. This report outlines that there is no evidence that the cost of obtaining a building permit has any effect on minimizing the number of cross connections of sanitary flows to storm sewers. Moreover, within the Ontario Building Code Act and City of Toronto Act, there are legal limitations to providing free plumbing permits. The continued monitoring of the storm outfalls by Toronto Water is still the most appropriate and effective method of locating and minimizing cross connections.

Financial Impact

There is no financial impact to Toronto Building if the City does not proceed with a program to waive building permit fees for minor residential plumbing projects.

The Deputy City Manager and Chief Financial Officer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial impact information.

DECISION HISTORY

In response to the March 31, 2008 memorandum from Councillor Adrian Heaps, the Planning and Growth Management Committee requested the General Manager, Toronto Water in consultation with the Chief Building Official to report on a free residential home plumbing inspection program that may prevent the cross connections of sanitary flows to storm sewers. The Committee decision document can be viewed at:

<http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2008/pg/decisions/2008-04-10-pg14-dd.pdf>.

ISSUE BACKGROUND

In his memorandum of March 31, 2008 the Councillor suggested a free residential home plumbing inspection program would act as a preventive measure to reduce cross connections of sanitary flows to storm sewers. The Councillor indicated that some residential homeowners are trying to save money on a plumbing permit by engaging in the plumbing work themselves and inadvertently connecting the sanitary fixtures to the storm drain.

COMMENTS

Toronto Building enforces the Ontario Building Code (OBC) under the authority of the *Building Code Act, 1992*. The OBC is a set of minimum provisions respecting the safety of buildings with reference to public health, fire protection and structural sufficiency. Toronto Building inspectors approve plans, issue building permits and conduct inspections to ensure that construction has proceeded in accordance with the approved plans. A plumbing permit is required for work in a new building, and additions or renovations to existing buildings.

The Building Code Act contains provisions for the setting and administration of building permit fees. The Act specifies that total fees collected must not exceed the anticipated reasonable costs to administer and enforce the Act. Section 82(2) of the City of Toronto Act prohibits the City from granting assistance by “giving a total or partial exemption from any levy, charge or fee.”

The Toronto Building 2008 fee schedule specifies the cost for a permit under the classification of “Repairs, Replacement and Additions of Buried Plumbing and Drainage Piping, Pool Drains” is a flat rate of \$92.94. There is no specified permit for “minor plumbing” work as described in the Councillor’s memorandum. A plumbing inspection is one of the items included in the cost of a plumbing permit, along with administrative costs to issue the permit and approve plans. Obtaining a permit is a cost effective means for a homeowner to ensure that plumbing work, whether done by them or a contractor, is reviewed and inspected to confirm it was installed and performs in accordance with provincial standards and regulations.

Homeowners may not apply for plumbing permits in some cases because they are not aware of their obligation to apply for a permit or they are conducting additional work without a permit. Furthermore, the homeowner may have a concern that the modification they are undertaking could result in their property assessment increasing that may result in an increase in their property taxes.

It cannot be assumed that the majority of residents within the City who did not apply for a plumbing permit would have applied if the permit was free. Nevertheless, it is the legal responsibility of the property owner to comply with all regulations, including applying for a permit whenever plumbing is to be installed or modified on private property.

In order to make information more accessible to the public on the need and benefits of obtaining a building permit Toronto Building has been enhancing its communications strategy. As part of the Divisional Accessibility Plan, Toronto Building's two key information brochures are now available to the public in 25 different languages. These two brochures have been selected as they contain information that applies to every construction project and every property in Toronto; they are: *Introduction to Building Permits* and *Construction Requirements and Guidelines*. The Chief Building Official has recently sent a letter to all Councillors advising them of these documents which are available at all customer service counters and on the City's website.

The Toronto Water Outfall Monitoring Program is designed to effectively identify and eliminate sources of sanitary contamination that are discharged from storm sewer outfalls to the City's surface waters. The Outfall Monitoring Program 2007 Progress Report can be viewed at:

<http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2007/pw/bgrd/backgroundfile-8876.pdf>

To date Toronto Water's Outfall Monitoring Program has successfully detected and eliminated 133 cross connections where sanitary flow had been discharged to the storm sewer system, of which 108 of these were single family residential properties. These cross connections, which have been corrected, were detected by Toronto Water through sampling and dye testing within the drainage area. A search of the Toronto Building database was unable to confirm that a building permit had been issued for these properties within the last 10 years (the timeframe covered by the database). A building permit may have been issued more than 10 years ago. Additionally, there is no confirmation that the cross contamination occurred within the 10 year timeframe either.

The waiving of the permit fee is no assurance that these 108 homeowners would have applied for a permit for the various reasons described above. Even if there were permits issued, Toronto Water would still need to conduct its Outfall Monitoring Program to identify and eliminate cross connections. Although there may be a decrease in the amount of sanitary flows detected if some of the residential properties had an inspection, there will still be the need to undertake the work required within the drainage area to identify potential sources from both residential and non-residential properties. The Outfall Monitoring Program has been very effective in locating the source of most cross connections.

This report outlines that there is no evidence that a free plumbing permit will result in an increase in permit applications and reduce cross connections. Toronto Water's continued monitoring of the storm outfalls to locate cross connections is still the most appropriate response to the issue.

This report has been written in consultation with the Chief Building Official.

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SIGNATURE

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