

IS THE PROPOSED THAMES JET D'EAU A HEALTH RISK?

By Ed Corrigan

The Blackburn family has made significant contributions to London. The \$400,000 bequest from the Marjorie Blackburn Estate to build a jet d'eau is a generous gift to the people of the City of London. It is certainly fitting to honour the Blackburn name. However, there are serious concerns being raised about the proposal to build a jet d'eau at the forks of the Thames as proposed by the Blackburn Family Estate and backed by some city officials.

The Thames River is not Lake Geneva. It is not safe to swim in the river. The Thames is badly contaminated by fecal coliform bacteria and E. coli from liquid manure from north of the City. The recent Walkerton contamination should be an environmental wake up call as to the risk of infection through polluted water. At least six people died and hundreds fell ill due to drinking contaminated water. Recent reports indicate that there are four more relapse cases or reinfections. There are real concerns about the drug and chlorine resistant nature of the particular strain of E. coli that struck Walkerton.

London's Pollution Control Plants also have serious wet weather overflow problems. These "wet weather events" result in raw sewage going into the Thames river. Serious health risks exist from exposure to fecal coliforms from liquid manure and human waste. The quality of water in the Thames River is more filthy than the water in Lake Huron and Lake Erie whose beaches are regularly closed due to the risk of infection. The quality of water in the river is far worse and the risk must be far higher. Spraying bacteria in the air, and especially E. coli, does not seem like a prudent thing to do.

In a recent visit to the Windsor Peace Fountain I saw that spray from the fountain travels about 150 meters as a fine mist. But you can still feel the spray about 300 metres from the fountain with a light wind. Air borne water droplets certainly can spread tiny bacteria and the risk of exposure to infection must exist.

Potential legal liability also exists with the coal tar "blob" in the south branch of the Thames. Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbons (known as PAHs) are highly carcinogenic and are the by-products of processing coal into fuel of which coal tar is the residue. These microscopic particles are almost undetectable and recent scientific research indicates that they are dangerous cancer causing agents. It is not wise to launch these tiny carcinogenic particles into the air to add to an already terrible quality of air in London. This city has reportedly the second worst air pollution in Ontario. Ontario is second in North America, behind Texas, for poor air quality. The jet d'eau spraying microscopic carcinogenic PAHs into the air is not going to help the situation.

Building a fountain in Ivey Park, or on the Talbot block, with clean water surely is a much better idea. There are a number of excellent companies that build fountains that are synchronized to music that together with appropriate lighting would help create a worthwhile attraction at the forks of the Thames. A splash fountain for children to play in would be much more preferable than a jet d'eau spewing sewage in the Thames.

Hopefully the Middlesex Health Unit and city officials will carefully examine this proposal to ensure that absolutely no risk to the public exists and that the City will not be dragged into expensive litigation over potential hazards to the public's health. The health concerns are present but there are also issues of silting of the river and debris flowing down the river which could plug the water intake pipes. The \$50,000 a year maintenance cost to be borne by the taxpayer is another concern. Hopefully rational views will prevail on this issue. However, even if the risk to public health is minuscule, I say that it is too great.