

Tapping into resources

The need for better use of water is a constant challenge for utility companies. Aquatera Utilities Inc. is the first regional utility corporation in Alberta and continually explores new ways for better utilization





Images courtesy of Ramsay & Winsor Photography

Aquatera Utilities Inc. provides the city of Grande Prairie, Alberta, with water and wastewater treatment, garbage collection and recycling services. Additionally, it serves areas within the County of Grande Prairie's water treatment and transmission systems, water distribution mains and structures, water services, sanitary sewer services, wastewater collection mains and structures, and wastewater treatment systems.

The organization symbolizes a fresh approach to conservation and innovation, protecting essential services, safeguarding health, and assuring the well-being of the environment, now and in the future.

Over the past year Aquatera has undertaken a number of projects and innovative initiatives to address the full-service utility corporation's commitment to its customers, stakeholders and the environment. These have included further investment in water, sewer and solid waste capital projects as its service area has expanded.

At the same time, Aquatera completed the first phase of an ambitious upgrading and expansion of the wastewater treatment plant to provide further capacity and help meet more stringent upcoming regulatory requirements.

Landfill remains a priority, and the last 12 months have seen further work geared toward extending the

life of the landfill following the expansion of eligible electronic materials for recycling and construction material diversion, as well as the collection and flaring of landfill gas, which has in turn resulted in a major reduction in greenhouse gas emissions—reducing annual greenhouse gas emissions by 5,500 metric tons, the equivalent of removing 8,000 vehicles from the road.

Further investment in a new water transmission line, along with the connection and upgrading of the Airport reservoir improved the water supply.

Environmental issues are always high on Aquatera's priorities, and during 2008 the initial design for riverbank stabilization at the Wapiti River was completed, preventing the risk of erosion and providing protection for important facilities. A formal water conservation program was developed and approved by Alberta Environment.

A multifamily residential construction waste diversion pilot program was undertaken at Hearthstone Manor, resulting in a 50 percent diversion of construction waste.

The organization has a commitment to hiring Aboriginals through the Aboriginal Workplace Participation Initiative (AWPI), an agreement involving the City of Grande Prairie, Aquatera Utilities Inc., and the Province of Alberta that was signed back in March 2005.

Through the agreement the parties aim to facilitate constructive cross-cultural relationships fostering a



supportive work environment, create linkages to the labor force and educational opportunities, identify opportunities for doing business with the Municipality and Aquatera, and identify employment and career development opportunities for Aboriginal people.

Not surprisingly, the organization undertakes various projects to support the local community, and in the past year these have included the Enviro-Thon, Homeless-for-a-Night event, City Scrub, and the Rotary Green-

a-Thon, as well as the JC Mackie Park and the Youth Emergency Shelter. The company also distributed \$77,000 to 12 local groups through its ongoing Bottle Donation Program.

Education is equally high on Aquatera's agenda, and in addition to organized school tours and classroom visits, the community is able to learn about the virtues of composting, environmental and recycling programs.

And recycling was very much the buzzword this



June when Aquatera Utilities entered into a one-year agreement with Habitat for Humanity that will take recycled building materials from the landfill to the living room. Under the new agreement, Habitat for Humanity will operate the Recycle Centre for Building Materials, also known as “the Restore.”

Looking to the future, it is easy to see why, in an era of deregulation, other private and public utilities and related companies are assessing their potential to

operate profitably in Northwestern Alberta. Moreover, modern and emerging technologies allow for relatively small firms to provide critical services to remote subdivisions, business parks and small communities. Aquatera has a significant headstart, given its capital assets, intergovernmental agreements and commitment. It is also superbly positioned to strike new arrangements as smaller communities face increasing responsibility under increasingly stringent government guidelines and licensing requirements.

There are numerous changes that impact Aquatera operations, and the utility is preparing to meet these challenges head-on.

Particularly salient is the need to invest in infrastructure to meet continued high regional growth and increasingly stringent environmental and water quality standards. It has been estimated that over \$90 million will need to be spent over the coming four years to address this issue.

The possibility of future alliances with nearby municipalities remains on the table, as Aquatera faces up to the challenge of sustaining a long-term water supply for the region. The Provincial Water for Life Strategy places a priority on aquatic life and potable water supply, and negotiations with the Province for an increased water diversion license to accommodate long-term growth needs remain ongoing and are impacted by a changing regulatory environment. The utility continues to explore the viability of joining with municipalities in the region to ensure a long-term, high-quality water supply.

The other key priority for Aquatera is to retain a competitive labor market. The nature of the positions available requires a highly skilled workforce to ensure the best standards of service, particularly as the infrastructure grows in size and ages. This will put pressure on to maintain services, equipment and sites as well as carry out replacements when necessary to ensure reliable and cost-effective services. The utility has already concluded that it will need to make fundamental changes to its structure to ensure its long-term financial sustainability.

The strongest impression one has is that Aquatera is a forward-thinking utility. Its strategies, to ensure a sustainable, profitable business through strategic management, living its values, accountability to the board of directors, organizational and operational best practices, growth, the creation of a culture of entrepreneurial spirit and improved communications are a blueprint for a utility aiming to deliver the highest standards for its customers against the pressures of a changing political environment. ●