

## Opposition to gravel pit continues

By Doug Holmes

Summerland Council continues to oppose a decision by the provincial Ministry of Energy and Mines to approve a gravel pit in an environmentally sensitive area at the end of Garnet Valley within Summerland's municipal boundaries.

The pit was approved despite widespread opposition from the District of Summerland, Regional District of Okanagan-Similkameen (RDOS), Penticton Indian Band (PIB), Summerland Chamber of Commerce, Penticton Chamber of Commerce, Trail of the Okanagans Society, environmental groups, agricultural producers, tourism associations, community organizations, and individual citizens.

In our referral letter to the Ministry dated Jan 24, 2024, the District noted numerous issues, including threats to the habitat of rare wildlife species, risk of landslides, riparian impacts, social and historical importance of the area to First Nations, importance of Garnet Valley as a recreational and tourist destination, safety for hikers and cyclists, impact to municipal infrastructure, and incompatibility with municipal zoning.

On Aug 14, after hearing of the approval, I wrote to Mines Minister Josie Osborne asking her to overturn the decision, and then Council met with her in person on Sept 17 at the Union of BC Municipalities (UBCM) convention in Vancouver. While sympathetic to our concerns, the minister said that permitting inspectors were delegated to make independent decisions without political interference, however it was arranged for several senior ministry staff to come to Summerland to meet with us.

At that meeting, on Sept 25, we were told the Ministry has limited ability to pull a permit once issued even when errors and oversights are identified. But they could potentially add further conditions to the permit and they committed to taking a second look at the application. We have since formally requested the addition of the following conditions:

- complete geotechnical study, given the geologic instability and active slip face in the area;
- complete hydrological study, given complex interactions with surface and ground water in the area;
- full archaeological impact assessment and traditional ecological knowledge assessment, given the area's rich history and traditional hunting, social and ceremonial activities of the sylix Okangan people;
- public information session hosted by the proponent, given the public mistrust in the process due to inadequate consultation and response to community concerns;
- increase in the reclamation liability from \$20,000 to \$100,000, given it's an environmentally sensitive area and unauthorized work has been conducted on the property in the past.

We stressed these conditions are needed before any gravel extraction can take place and that, regardless, the District remains completely opposed to the pit and reserves the right to challenge the decision using any legal means necessary.

Council continues to work with all interested parties to stop the pit, including the PIB and Garnet Valley AgriTourism Association. It was encouraging to see the pit become a provincial election issue and that newly elected MLA Amelia Boulton has voiced her opposition to the project. It is unknown what impact if any the election will have on the gravel pit decision and legal action remains an option if a political solution cannot be found.

*Doug Holmes is mayor of Summerland*