

If we truly had a pollution problem with the Thames River for which the solution was as simple as decommissioning the dam, I would be among the first to argue on behalf of shutting down the dam. The trouble is, the problem with the river water is not so simple.

The Thames River watershed is extensive: it ranges north beyond Mitchell and Moncton to the same extent as Clinton; it ranges east as far as Woodstock and Mount Elgin; and it ranges west as far as Ilderton, drawing water into the Thames River that finally flows through London. Between 2006 and 2010 there were 666 reported spills in the watershed. The worst offenders were closest to London: Pottersburg Creek (Dundas St.) at 42 spills, the South Thames (Ingersoll) at 51 spills, Dingman Creek (South-West London) at 109 spills, and the Forks (London City Centre) at 143 spills. In other words, just over half of the total spills, that is 345 spills, originated more or less in London itself.

Even if we discount Dingman Creek because it does not flow into the Thames River until after the Springbank Dam, that leaves 236 reported spills of noxious substances going directly into the river water flowing through to Springbank Park via the Thames River. My point is, whether the Springbank Dam is up or down is almost irrelevant compared to this steady stream of pollutants that is being released directly into the river water and not being addressed.

Decommissioning the Springbank Dam should not be thought of as any kind of real solution to the ongoing problem of unacceptable spills into the river water that occur upstream and flow through the city.

The anglers, the rowers, and the canoeists are all arguing the same point: we want the river cleaned up. Where we differ is in what we perceive the problem to be.

I believe that a concerned population actively engaged in recreational uses of the river that include paddling, rowing, and dragonboating will mobilize on behalf of the health of that river. This means we need to fix the dam.

But we also need to demand and expect more of the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority. If we need stiffer penalties and guaranteed enforcement as a deterrent for those who pollute our water, so be it.

We need to demand and expect more of the City of London as well. The sewer overflows must end. Rather than worrying about the superficial aesthetics of riverbanks, we need to upgrade the sewer system so these kinds of spills by the city are eliminated.

Whether there will be the public will to sustain these kinds of demands very much depends on how much the river is made available to the public. The easy decision is to do nothing, and little or nothing will change.