

## CITYSCAPE

Insensitive development is ruining Saanich's last open waterway

By PHIL ESMONDE

A recent investigation by Monday has revealed that Saanich municipality may face a lawsuit from the federal department of fisheries over its handling of a dredging and channelling project on Swan Creek.

The federal agency obtained a "cease and desist" order last month against both the municipality and Chew Excavating Company Ltd., and has requested that the federal justice department look into further legal action. The agency alleged the dredging project, located between Carey and Columbine Roads, is causing siltation which may endanger salmon and cutthroat trout in adjoining Colquitz Creek.

Monday has also learned that the dredging project was initiated without the approval of the Saanich environmental committee, and over the specific objections of its own environmental consultant, Dr. Robert Langford.

## THE RAPE OF THE SWAN

The dispute highlights the decline and fall of a commitment by the municipality to follow an open space concept and stream enhancement programme on both the Swan and the Colquitz, which it first adopted in 1972, although no overall design or plan has been approved since.

The Colquitz-Swan Creek waterway system, with its tributaries, stretches through 20 miles of urban and rural Saanich, providing flood control for a total area larger than Victoria. Over the years however, urban development has encroached on more and more of the streambank area, increasing pollution levels and general untidiness.

In 1967, then-Saanich municipal engineer Frank Neate, reacting to public disgust about the dirtiness of the two streams, initiated a study which recommended the municipality buy land along the streambanks to save them from further encroachment and decay.

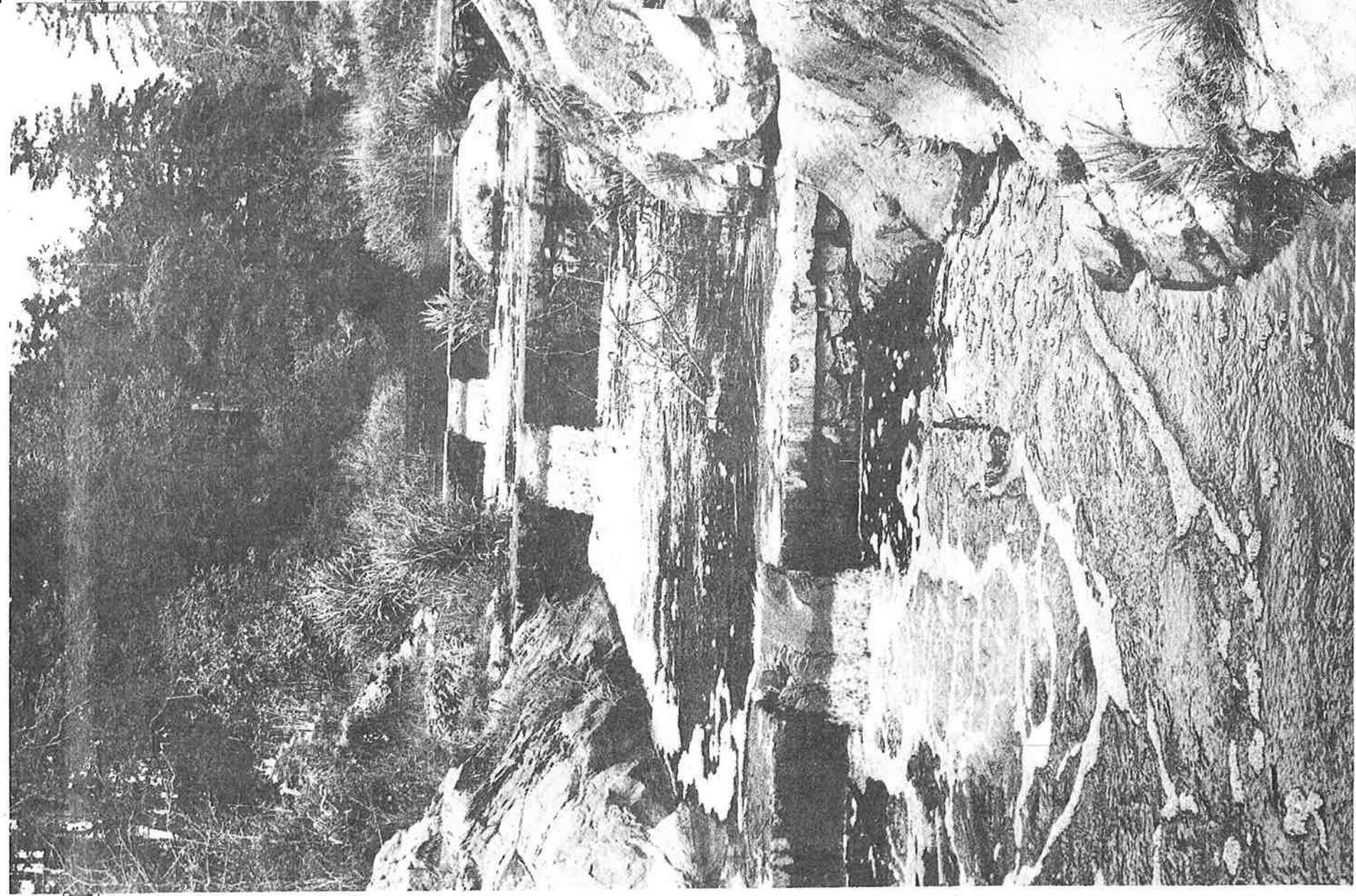
Neate pointed out that the cost of buying the necessary land would be approximately \$500,000, compared to an estimated \$3 million for construction of an underground drainage pipe—the traditional method of handling the flow from creeks in urban areas. Neate also envisioned damming the two streams to provide a summer fishing and swimming area, plus a constant flow of water which would compensate for low periods in the summer months.

Lands were acquired by Saanich, after council adopted the Neate plan, and it is estimated that approximately 95 per cent of the streambank is now under municipal control. But the streambank improvement programme, which was supposed to accompany the land acquisition, has never materialized. As a result, most of the banks along the two creeks retain the ugly appearance of a drainage ditch—except for some improvements along the Colquitz, completed in the early 1970s.

Blame for the neglect can be placed on lack of funds, differences of opinion on how best to protect and beautify the banks, poorly-planned development projects adjacent to the creeks, and most of all, a distinct lack of communication and co-operation between municipal staff and the elected officials. The ill-starred dredging and channelling project on the Swan near Carey Road is a prime example.

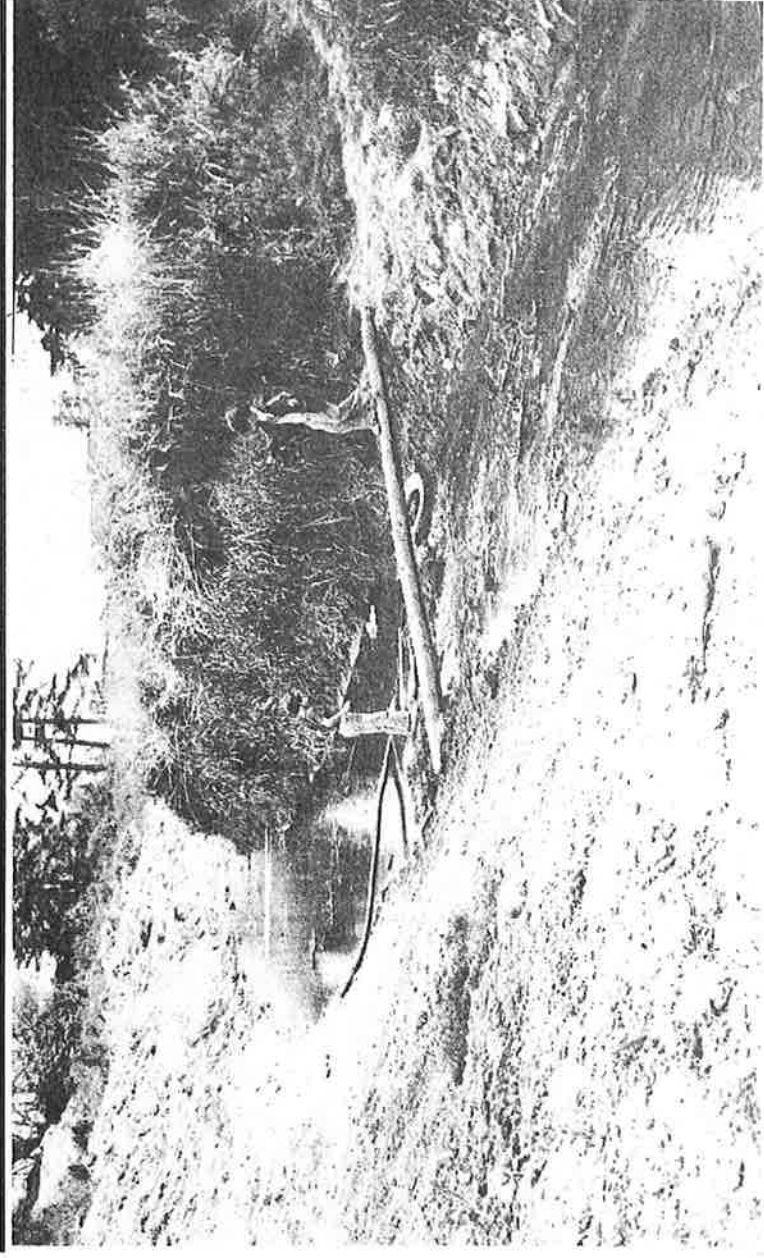
Investigation concerning the project reveals a serious communication problem at Saanich municipal hall. Final say on any works carried out on the waterways system has to come from the environmental committee,

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photos by Phil Esmonde

Colquitz Creek—where the dream came true  
Swan Creek Channelling project—where the nightmare began



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Continued from Page 3

## Swan Creek dying

a political body within the municipality. The environmental committee is in close touch with the environmental group, a professional staff body. Yet the channelling went ahead despite the objections of the chairman of the staff group, Dr. Robert Langford, and other members of the group.

Cliff Warren, the municipal engineer, maintains the channelling was part of a policy for Swan Creek to be free-flowing from Swan Lake to the Colquitz, and that "the whole design, including channelling work, was cleared by the environmental committee over a year ago."

But has a design been approved? Langford says the policy of a free flowing creek was approved, but that no co-ordinated design has been approved, or even exists. Alderman Joe Bourke, a relatively new member of the environmental committee, knows of no such design approval, either, and the municipal planner, Gil Laursen, says he would have probably heard if a scheme for channelling had been approved. He hasn't.

Yet Warren claims the design and channelling were approved at a June 21, 1976 meeting of the environmental committee. Monday found however, that there was a no June 21 meeting of the committee. There was a meeting on June 22, but this was only concerned with a culvert installation at the intersection of Carey and Columbine, making an amendment to a May 20 meeting. That meeting was concerned solely with the culvert, and no mention of designs or future channelling was made. Also, there was no quorum at the May 20 meeting, so any recommendations made could not have been legal, even if they had dealt with channelling.

Investigating further, it was found that one week before the channelling project started, the subject was brought to the attention of the environmental group. According to Langford, it was unanimously decided that there was to be no channelling until there was an overall design for the creek. It seems the engineering department went ahead, not only without approval, but against the objections of one of the very groups who should have approved it.

To put this into perspective with the waterway system, must one recall that it is unplanned channelling

such as this project which has caused the early death of many an urban stream. Streams are deepened; banks are left dangerously steep, muddy, and slippery; the banks start to crumble, causing more danger; and finally there is pressure to "put it into a pipe." This scenario has already occurred twice in Victoria, with Bowker Creek, and parts of Blenkinsop Creek.

A further encroachment on the open space scheme is caused by the culvert installation at the Carey and Columbine intersection. The culvert is placed so low that the possibility of raising the water level, part of the original scheme, has been seriously hampered. As well, at the time of installation, the old steel culvert was buried (despite the objections of both Frank Neate and Dr. Langford). Neate wanted to retain the old culvert to allow for the possibility of future water level raising, while Langford wanted to retain it as a potential foot or bicycle path. Neate maintains that "it had been agreed at both the environmental committee and municipal administrator levels that the culvert would remain open." To be re-opened now as part of the open space scheme would cost Saanich taxpayers additional money.

Neate and Langford are also critical of the sloping around the culvert. Neate notes that from a strictly engineering view there is nothing wrong with the culvert, but, "in terms of the open space concept, public safety, and the flexibility of the site, it is dangerous. It has created a pool with steep banks, and there is some risk of slippage."

Another violation of the open space concept on Swan Creek shows not only bad management, but involves possible contract breaking. In November of 1974, three parcels of land were acquired by Saanich from the Dunhill Development Corporation (now B.C. Housing Corporation). The bill of sale stated the land, which lies along Swan Creek at Columbine Road, was for park purposes, and put the price of the properties at \$1, the legal minimum for a sale. The land was being exchanged for a replotting scheme so that Dunhill could build a development in the area. Shortly after this exchange, Dunhill turned over to the municipality the sum of \$250,000 to pay for the costs of services to the development, "including, but not restricted, to improving neighbouring park lands".

The contract also required the municipality to acquire the right of way for what is now Columbine road, design it, and build 1,000 feet of it. Not one penny of the \$250,000 apparently, ever went to improving the three



The Swan in summer: weed-choked and filthy.



Dunhill development (left) and the 'neighbourhood park'.

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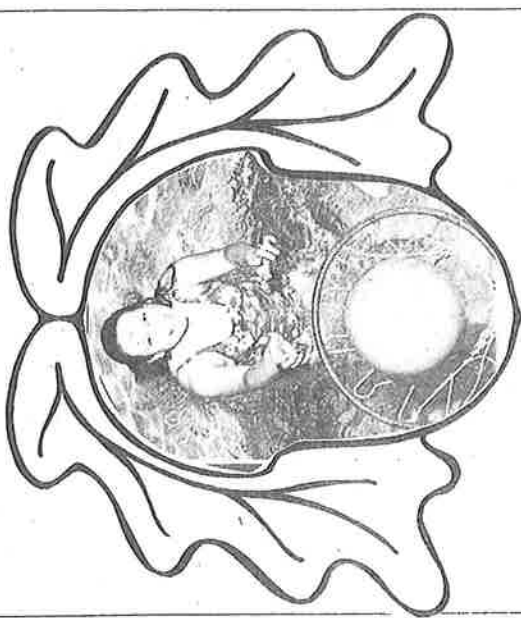
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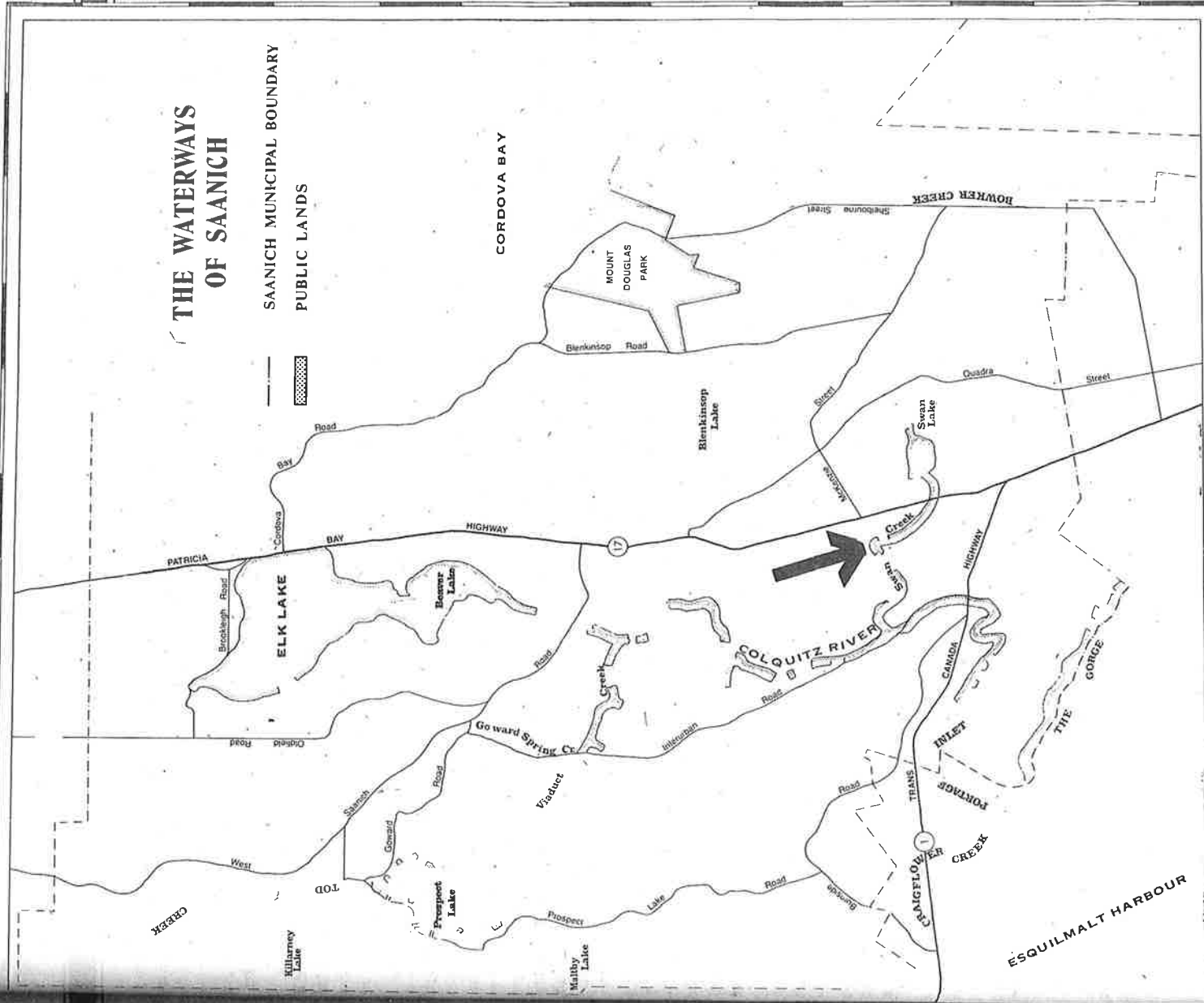
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Map: Barry Wilkin & Yvonne Lenik

Saanich waterways—arrow indicates location of controversial dredging project.

lots of park land "given" to Saanich by Dunhill, as seems to have been required by the contract. In this area today, weeds and field shrubs predominate. (See picture) The stream remains mostly plugged and an eyesore. Why?

Frank Andrews, of Saanich parks, Frank Harris, the municipal land purchaser, and Gil Laursen of the planning department, were asked specifically whether Dunhill had given any money for stream or land improvement. They all claimed no knowledge. Harris, in fact, said that even had the money been given for this purpose, the sum provided wasn't even enough to cover the cost of the sewer and road installation.

This must raise serious questions about the contracts Saanich officials are making in the name of their taxpayers. Why wasn't Dunhill made to pay for the total costs of the services to the development *after they were completed*, and the total bill known? Or do Saanich officials believe that *all* taxpayers benefit from this development?

But unfulfilled contracts are not the only problem cropping up along Swan Creek. One of three lots purchased by 275 property owners under a local improvement project for streambank beautification is being used (and has been for three years) as a parking lot for provincial government allotment gardens, at Kent road and Douglas Street. The 1972 bylaw initiating the local improvement project stated that the lots were to be purchased for park purposes.

Questioned about this usage of park land, Saanich land purchaser Frank Harris claimed this is only temporary, and will be used as a negotiating tool to acquire streambank in the the allotment gardens from the provincial government. He added that there was no statement of intent by Saanich in 1972 that the lands would ever be improved. Frank Andrews of parks confirmed this point.

These vague intents have been further confused by differences in opinion between Neate and Langford. The original scheme as visualized by Neate was to dam the Colquitz-Swan system during the summer months. This would raise the water level from a trickle and provide a

full stream which could be used for swimming, fishing, and possibly canoeing. The river-raising would also cut down on the weed problem in the two streams. But this scheme came under criticism from Langford when he joined Saanich as an environmental consultant.

Langford was concerned with the diminishing numbers of salmon and cutthroat trout in the streams, and felt that Neate's scheme would not provide the best habitat in which the fish could thrive. Langford wanted alternating pools and ripples along the two streams. Stubbornness set in, to the point that any design brought up before Langford's environmental group came under criticism from one side or the other.

(Langford's position has since changed somewhat. He is now pushing for a removable dam on the Colquitz to cut down the weed problem. Neate meanwhile has left Saanich, and apparently has no more input in designs for the enhancement programme.)

Ironically, the differences of these two men, both of whom care a great deal about saving the streams, may have helped confuse and hinder work on the programme.

But what seems most evident in this whole issue is a lack of direction and leadership within Saanich council hall. Unplanned and mismanaged works have been allowed to be carried out without any reference to previous policies of council. There is a lack of communication and co-operation among certain staff bodies, and between those bodies and some political groups. Contracts may have been broken, and federal environmental law flouted. Where are the responsible elected officials? What are they doing?

The Colquitz-Swan Creek Enhancement Program has been allowed to fall in priority to the point that almost nothing now is being done on the project. In 1975, \$6,291 was spent on river improvement. In 1976, \$2,525. This year nothing is budgetted. What could be a beautiful greenbelt and recreational area within Greater Victoria has been allowed to remain an eyesore, and in many areas a hazard. Will these fish-bearing streams be left to suffer the same fate as the Bowker? The taxpayers deserve better.