

Council of Canadians National Chairperson Maude Barlow and Energy and Climate Justice Campaigner Andrea Harden-Donahue were invited to visit Shoal Lake 40 and learn more about the community's quest for "Freedom Road." The isolated community has had a boil water advisory for more than 17 years.

A Community Fights for Their "Freedom Road"

by Jan Malek

This spring, Council of Canadians Chairperson Maude Barlow and Council campaigner Andrea Harden-Donahue walked with others across Shoal Lake's thinning ice to reach the isolated community of Shoal Lake 40. The people who live there rely on a rickety barge to leave their community and cross the waters in summer, they walk over the ice in winter, and take their chances on thinning ice in spring and fall – all so the people in Winnipeg can have clean drinking water.

"This body of water is like a time capsule," explains Stewart Redsky, a local resident. "Shoal Lake 40 is many years behind in our development, yet we are 20 kilometres from the TransCanada Highway. [You can] see the results of what was done by humans to supply Winnipeg's drinking water...on the better side of the aqueduct."

Shoal Lake 40 First Nation sits close to the Manitoba-Ontario border. It was cut off from the mainland a century ago when an aqueduct was built to supply Winnipeg with fresh water.

While clean water flows through the aqueduct, murky, polluted water is diverted to the community.

Shoal Lake 40 has been under a boil water advisory for 17 years and relies on massive quantities of bottled water for their needs. But bringing the water into the community – and accessing jobs, food, health care, and more – is extremely difficult as the community

has no all-weather road connecting it to the mainland.

Building a permanent, all-weather road – dubbed "Freedom Road" by the people who live in Shoal Lake 40 – would cost an estimated \$30 million. While the Winnipeg and Manitoba governments have pledged \$10 million each to build it, the federal government has refused to pitch in.

At a recent meeting with community residents, Natural Resources Minister Greg Rickford refused to commit federal funds for the construction project. Several community residents were reduced to tears, frustrated by the history that continues to isolate them.

Building Winnipeg's aqueduct

In 1914, the original Anishinaabe village at the mouth of the Falcon River was forced to relocate to a nearby peninsula when workers began construction on the aqueduct that would carry fresh water to Winnipeg. The aqueduct was built on sacred Indig-



enous burial grounds between 1914 and 1919.

The peninsula became a human-made island with the construction of a canal that was part of the water diversion works. More than 3,000 acres of reserve lands and burial grounds were stolen and made City of Winnipeg property. The reserve was split into three separate parcels.

Since then, the community has struggled with isolation and the lack of clean water.

In the 1990s, simple running water systems were installed in the homes in Shoal Lake 40, but the treatment is not adequate to make the surface water safe to drink. Low-grade Falcon River water reaches the unprotected Shoal Lake 40 taps first. Since a 1997 outbreak of Cryptosporidiosis, the community has been on a boil water advisory. It is one of the longest-lasting advisories in Canada.



Stewart Redsky describes how people put washcloths over their taps before bathing to catch debris – how the water has led to skin conditions and other health problems. People experience digestive issues occasionally, which is likely a result of not rinsing their plates with bottled water before eating.

But Shoal Lake 40's troubles don't end with water.

As a result of their isolation, residents don't have adequate garbage disposal. They are left to dig and rotate pits overflowing with garbage. When Stewart explained this situation, and why old and full septic tanks are now being dumped on land – chosen as the location to have the least negative impact – it was clear that this is a desperate situation for the community.

The people of Shoal Lake do not choose to live this way; they are forced to.

The leaking of this sewage into groundwater and into the surrounding lakes is a major concern to the community.

Adding to the risks the community faces is TransCanada's proposed Energy East

pipeline. If approved, it will run above Falcon Lake and High Lake, which drain into the area. A pipeline spill would risk contaminating Falcon River and Shoal Lake.

Preston Redsky, a single father from Shoal Lake 40, described an elder of the community who used to visit him every morning for coffee. "He told me: 'You youth, you have to stop this. You have to stop this pipeline.'" Preston, along with others in the community, pledged to do just that.

There have been two designs completed for a water treatment plant in past years. At the tender stage, the federal government decided in both cases that it was simply too expensive and too complicated to build on the island.

That is why Freedom Road is so important.

"Having a road means a water treatment plant. It means an economy, it means survival as a community," said Cuyler Cotton, a policy analyst with the First Nation in a recent *Globe and Mail* article.

The road will also improve safety. Nine people have died in recent years after falling through the ice while trying to cross the lake.

"My family calls me a broken record," says Stewart. "Until we see a firm commitment from the governments for this money, it is hard to believe this will change. People here are lacking hope."

The Council of Canadians is working with the people of Shoal Lake 40 to help draw attention to the issues and secure funding for Freedom Road.

The tour of Shoal Lake 40 ended in the recreational room built off of the community centre. It has two pool tables and rows and rows of large bottles of water.

"Imagine your family, your elder, picking up one of these to make their tea every morning, to make their food," said Stewart. "When you leave to the better side of the aqueduct I want you to know that I am not asking for your sympathy, I am asking for your knowledge, for your awareness, for justice."

With files from Andrea-Harden Donahue. Jan Malek is the Publications Officer for the Council of Canadians.