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Water Flows North

By **ANDREA MILLER** Advocate staff

Thirsty communities north of Red Deer will get their first taste of water from a \$36-million pipeline next month.

Construction of the 62-km regional line from Red Deer to **Ponoka** has finished and final testing is underway.

"We are ready to go. We have had no problems," said Lacombe town spokesman Paul Deleske.

Ponoka will be the first to draw water from the system in early May, said Deleske. Water will flow into Lacombe a week later and into Blackfalds about two weeks later.

The pipeline - four years in the planning - will bring water from the Red Deer River to the three towns after it is treated in the City of Red Deer's water treatment plant.

The counties of Lacombe and **Ponoka** plan to tie into the pipeline in the future. The North Red Deer River Water Services Commission, which operates the line for the municipalities, is now waiting for the go-ahead from the city's water treatment plant operators. The plant underwent major improvements to feed the regional line.

To prepare for the long-anticipated day, the towns are sending out thousands of brochures and taking out advertisements to alert residents to the changeover.

"Residents will certainly start to notice a dramatic difference as we switch from our very soft well water to a different quality Red Deer water," said Deleske.

Ponoka Mayor Larry Henkelman said people may notice a different taste and hardness of water. Water hardness will increase and levels of sodium and alkaline will decrease, according to a town brochure.

Deleske said each town has a plan for replacing well water, now in water lines, with water from the regional line.

In Lacombe, the two-week process will begin when the town's reservoirs are reduced to about 25 per cent of capacity.

The reservoirs will then be refilled with water from the regional pipeline.

Town crews will speed up the transition by opening fire hydrants to flush out the system.

Deleske said the towns treat their well water differently than the city treatment

plant. Lacombe, for instance, uses chlorine, while Red Deer uses a process called chloramination, requiring both chlorine and ammonia.

In June, a ceremony may be held in **Ponoka** to mark the launch of the water line. The project is slightly ahead of schedule. Project planners previously expected the line would be activated in June. Pipeline installation began in April 2005. The Alberta government is paying about half the cost of the pipeline. But this week, the government announced it will cover 90 per cent of the costs of building regional water and sewer lines.

It doesn't appear the communities north of Red Deer will be eligible for the increased amount. Government spokesman Trent Bancarz said the water line is already finished and the new funding program is not retroactive. Henkelman said he hopes the North Red Deer River Water Services Commission will access some of the funding. It would be unfair to treat some communities differently than other communities, he said.

"If someone else gets 90 per cent of funding, it puts them at a competitive advantage for their water rates. Someone should not be spending more for water in **Ponoka** or anywhere else."

Residents in the towns are paying higher water fees to help pay for water from the regional system. The regional pipeline is intended to provide a secure source of water as some towns face water shortages. The water line may eventually be extended another 18 km to Hobbema if a deal is worked out with the First Nations bands in the area.