

Improve records of closed wells

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This week, demolition crews began knocking down homes in Calmar, just south of the city, after it was discovered to the shock and horror of local residents that there was a leaking natural gas well in the backyard of a new home. Imperial Oil moved in fairly quickly to assess the well, and two others in the vicinity, and stop the leaks, but now has to remove a number of the houses to bring a service rig onto the site to permanently seal -- or in oilpatch lingo, "abandon" -- the well that was located behind one of the residences.

This is a house owner's nightmare, not only for the residents who have to relocate, but also for their neighbours who have to cope with the demolition, the well abandonment and the aftermath. There's also a likelihood the value of all their properties may be devalued by the proximity of the non-operating wells.

They likely wouldn't have moved there if they had known about the well. Who would? They must be fairly compensated for the lost equity and the turmoil they have endured and will continue to endure.

This should also be a concern to all Albertans, given the amount of drilling and associated pipeline construction that goes on in the province annually. The Ed Stelmach government must take action to ensure this does not happen again. This is, and will continue to be, an issue of safety and security.

Sending out an advisory bulletin to municipalities, like the one dispatched from Municipal Affairs in August, is just not good enough. There must be legislation, with teeth, that makes it mandatory for developers and municipalities to certify there is no oilpatch infrastructure on any land proposed for development.

The Energy Resources Conservation Board has a comprehensive, though not complete, record, of all wells drilled since 1945. The onus must be on the developer to ensure that record is checked and to undertake any additional measures that may be required to determine if there are abandoned wells on the property.

To simplify the process for developers, the ERCB records must be included as part of the one-call service that alerts construction workers of underground infrastructure.

Currently, when wells are officially abandoned, they are sealed and the well pipe is cut off one metre below the ground surface. Once that occurs, all reference to the wells is removed from the land title.

This is a reckless practice for all parties involved, and one that potentially jeopardizes future generations. There must be some method created to flag the location of wells and abandoned pipelines on property that may be bought and sold and used for a variety of purposes in the future.

Alberta has more than 140,000 abandoned wells.

Common sense dictates we must know where they all are.

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