

## Elderberry Street resident losing out in challenge of \$1,000-plus water bills



By Makayla Pereira

Have high water bills ever been an issue for you?

Doug Jones, General Manager of Infrastructure Services for Town of Orangeville confirmed last week that the municipality routinely receives about 10 complaints of extremely high water bills per year.

The crux of the situation? Right, or wrong, the burden of those bills almost always falls on the resident, even when it would appear almost impossible for them to have gone through the amount of water they have been billed for.

Some Orangeville citizens have gone so far as to withdraw money from their savings accounts to pay these high water bills in an effort to avoid further issues. For Sushil Shundil, he's simply looking for an explanation.

'If I had done something wrong I will 100 percent pay the bill, but in this situation there has been no cause provided for the high bills,' Mr. Shundil, a resident of Elderberry Street in the Montgomery Village subdivision., explains.

So far, Mr. Shundil has refused to pay two 'extremely high' monthly water bills totalling almost \$3,000 in an effort to make a change and set the tone for many others in town.

He hopes that with his efforts to fight back against these bills he can help others in the community who are experiencing or have experienced bills like this before. He is encouraging others to step up and talk about their high bills as well.

So far Mr. Shundil hasn't been able to make much progress. He attended an Orangeville Council meeting on June 24 and during this meeting was told that the municipality can't offer a solution, or even an explanation, for the bills, which ran \$1,300 and \$1,600 respectively.

Mr. Shundil explained, 'We got a call on April 23 from Orangeville Hydro, and the representative said we were using too much water but we were doing everything we normally do, nothing had changed in the home. She then told me to check my meter reading and I did so and she explained that the bill is around \$1,600. I didn't know how this could be possible.'

Shocked and confused, Mr. Shundil took it upon himself to bring a plumber to his home and have it inspected for a leak, or any other possible issues that could have caused the water bill to skyrocket. However, he says no issues were found inside his home.

'I'm scared the next bill will be extremely high again,' said Mr. Shundil, who was charged just over \$1,600 for water used during

the billing period of February.

?Typically when there is a high water bill it can attributed to something that has happened in the house, like a leak, a running softener or something that has occurred and if we know exactly when this high usage occurred that can pinpoint exactly what the problem may be,? said Mr. Jones.

Now, Mr. Shundil is living in fear of receiving another high utility bill. As a self-described low-income family, the Orangeville resident stated that another lofty bill would be catastrophic. He has had to seek out treatment, locally, to handle and deal with the stress the situation has caused.

Further explaining how the system works in Orangeville, Mr. Jones noted that anyone with concerns over their water meter could call the Town and request an official test be conducted. The cost of this test is \$300. To date, Mr. Jones confirmed the municipality has never encountered a situation where a water meter has seriously failed.

?I've spoken to some of our municipal partners who have faced some of these same problems. In terms of those other municipalities, the same as in Orangeville, they have never taken a meter, tested it and had significantly more water flow through than usual,? Mr. Jones said. ?Meters do not speed up. They don't measure water that doesn't flow through them. They can't physically do that.?

Mr. Jones confirmed the municipality is currently planning to upgrade its water meters, but noted the bulk of those upgrades would be on the communications side, rather than the meters themselves.

?When the Town installed these water meters in 2003, the technology used would send a meter reading to every home. The world has now moved over to smart meter readings, we'd like to do the same thing,? Mr. Jones said. ?That would allow us to address concerns of residents more quickly, help identify issues and lower costs. It would allow us to keep data on when water is being used and allow alarms to be set if a home is significantly over (its usual readings). But regarding the actual technology used for reading water in meters today, that will stay the same.?

Mr. Jones hopes the municipality will be in a position to transition to smart meter readings in 2020.

Not that this information helps Mr. Shundil in his current predicament. Council having essentially informed him there was nothing they could do to help, Mr. Shundil feels like he has been left in the lurch. The situation is starting to take its toll, with Mr. Shundil informing the Citizen he has had to seek medical attention, participate in physiotherapy and, ultimately, has been unable to work for more than a week.

?I tried keeping in contact, I went to the council meeting, I tried to find a solution to this, but there doesn't seem to be one. Now they're asking me how much I can afford to pay each month to pay off my bills. Even with an instalment plan, it's going to be \$550 a month,? Mr. Shundil says.

Refusing to simply lie down, he says he will continue to take action against these high water bills, noting he won't rest until he is offered what he deems to be an acceptable explanation or solution for the issue.