

# Protecting the water

Athabasca Watershed Council welcomes community to Jan. 12 open house

MATTHEW ALLEN  
T&C STAFF

In a few words, Athabasca-Sturgeon-Redwater MLA Colin Piquette articulated why the Athabasca Watershed Council's role is so vital in the region.

"Without water, there is nothing," he said.

Piquette was one of over 20 guests hosted by the council and the Alice B. Donahue Library and Archives at an open house at the Athabasca train station on Jan. 12. Attendees learned about the council's mandate, goals and the history of the region.

"It was good to hear the discussions and see people pointing at our images of the river's history," said the coun-

cil's administrative coordinator Jason Ponto. "Seeing all these people is a reminder that I'm not working for myself. I'm working for the community."

The watershed council is both an educational and advisory group that has existed in the Athabasca region since 2009.

It promotes public awareness about the area of land that collects and drains water into the Athabasca River. This region, called the Athabasca watershed, covers approximately 159,000 square kilometres, which is roughly 24 per cent of Alberta.

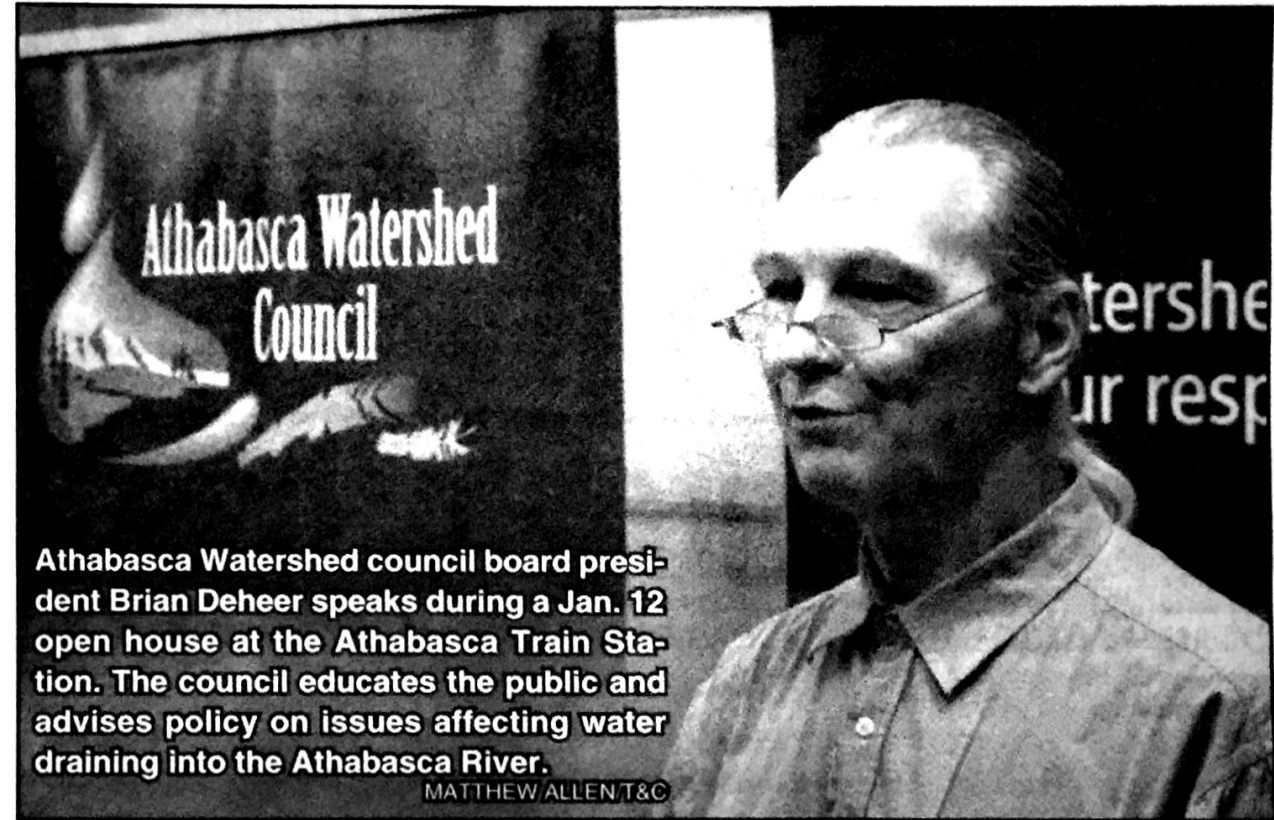
Informing the public living in this area about issues affecting the watershed is a significant

part of the council's mandate.

"I knew just a little bit before I came," said Sherry Neaves, an Athabasca resident who attended the open house. "But I learned a lot about the watershed as a result of being here."

The council's other purpose is to make sure the watershed is managed in a way that makes economic sense, is environmentally sustainable and meets the need of the municipalities dependent on it.

To do this, council members meet with the communities and companies operating within the Athabasca Watershed and facilitate discussions in order to develop sustainable policy.



**Athabasca Watershed council board president Brian Deheer speaks during a Jan. 12 open house at the Athabasca Train Station. The council educates the public and advises policy on issues affecting water draining into the Athabasca River.**

MATTHEW ALLEN/T&C

Council board chair Brian Deheer said planning for the future requires building consensus between the different stakeholders.

"Everyone is aware of the water and feels some kind of attachment to it," he said.

"A lot of communities are located next to the river or are in close proximity to it, so we want to take advantage of

that connection to raise awareness."

Ponto said the history of the region offers valuable lessons for how to administer the watershed moving forward.

"If you look at the people settling the land 130 years ago, it was relatively haphazard," he said. "Planning is something that's relatively new and something we're starting to

take seriously."

Deheer agreed, saying it is important for stakeholders to think about the future when creating policy.

"When we only think in the present, the best decisions aren't always made," he said.

"We aren't only thinking about current residents, we're thinking about future generations."