

Bala Falls hydro project brings safety, economic concerns: township

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MUSKOKA LAKES - The Township of Muskoka Lakes is now expressing safety and economic concerns about the current plan for a proposed hydroelectric project at the north Bala Falls.

The Swift River Energy Limited proposal to build a three to five megawatt run of the river hydro facility has been the subject of vocal protests from the community for more than two years.

The township weighed in on the issue this week after receiving more detailed information on project plans from Swift River as part of the environmental screening process. The township needs to submit information this month for the Ministry of Environment's consideration of an environmental screening "bump up" or more extensive analysis of the project, said township chief administrative officer Walt Schmid.

Approximately 40 people attended a special council meeting discussing the issue on Aug. 11.

The proposed water flow over the falls is totally unacceptable and will dramatically affect the aesthetics of the falls, said Schmid. He said the proposal would result in "a dramatic reduction in the historical flow and attraction of the falls."

Schmid went on to say the proposed amount of water flow would create a non-existent feature of only bare rocks dramatically affecting Bala's tourism.

There are also concerns that the flow velocities in the area of the Bala Wharf will be too high for safe swimming or in the case of an accident where someone falls off the wharf, or out of a canoe or boat, said Schmid in his report.

"It is a swimmers risk and I would suggest a boater's risk," said Schmid.

Schmid said his own calculations on the velocity of the water appears to differ from Swift River's.

"I don't think they (Swift River) have the right numbers," said Schmid. He suggested his calculations could



ABOUT THE PROJECT. Muskoka Lakes Township chief administrative officer Walt Schmid explains his concerns about a proposal for a hydroelectric project at the north Bala Falls at a special township council meeting on Aug. 11. (Photo by Karen Longwell) *Karen Longwell*

be incorrect.

Township staff has discussed the possibility of creating a short break wall, built at a 90 degree angle to the Wharf into Bala Bay with Swift River. The wall would extend to the lake bottom, cutting off any current into the north channel from the area in front of the wharf, in effect creating a stilling action for these waters, said Schmid.

Council agreed to submit concerns to Swift River and the Ministry of Environment. Schmid said he would come back with a status update on Sept. 15.

At the same meeting, councillors learned more about municipal authority on green energy projects in light of the new Green Energy Act. Schmid said project proponents are required to engage in consultation with local government, but the municipal government has little authority to stop a project.

"Local authority to control or stop such projects has largely been removed and placed at the provincial level with limited rights of appeal with the environmental review tribunal," said Schmid summarizing a solicitor's report.

The recommended approach is to participate in the consultative process.

"So in short, the Township of Muskoka Lakes does not have the authority to control the north Bala Falls small hydroelectric environmental screening report or project, but we must try to influence what we can out of this. The authority for approval lies solely with the province of Ontario," said Schmid.

Schmid's entire 39 page report is available on line at www.muskokalakes.ca under the sub-heading Your Government and agendas.

The Township is planning to hold a public meeting on the issue in September.

Town Hall Meeting

Save the Bala Falls, a community group opposing the hydroelectric project, will hold a town hall meeting this Saturday, Aug. 14 at 10 a.m. at Bala Community Centre, located on Maple Street. There will be an update on the situation, along with a question and answer session.

For more on this story see the Wednesday edition of the Gravenhurst Banner.