

Boisterous crowd attends Bala Falls meeting

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MUSKOKA LAKES - Muskoka Lakes Mayor Karen Ellis and her fellow township councillors found themselves in deep water during a 'Save the Bala Falls' meeting Saturday in Bala.

The meeting, which was held at the community centre, drew more than 200 residents opposed to the creation of a hydro electric station by Swift River Energy Limited at the north Bala Falls. Ellis, Township CAO Walt Schmid, several councillors and several would-be councillors who have filed their nomination papers for this fall's election also attended the meeting.

The local politicians drew heavy criticism from many in the group for a perceived failure to come out strongly enough against the proposed hydro electric

facility.

Schmid was the first scheduled speaker to address the standing room only crowd.

Re-iterating what had already been said during a special council meeting earlier in the week, Schmid said the township has serious concerns with Swift River Energy Limited's proposal to build a three to five megawatt run-of-the-river hydro facility at the north Bala Falls.

Schmid said the township has specific concerns with safety in the area and the aesthetics of the reduction in water flow.

"That's going to have a major impact on our local tourism economy," said Schmid. "It's unacceptable from the township's point of view."

Swift River Energy Limited responded to the township's concerns this week by saying the water flow and safety at the falls will not be impacted by its project. (See accompanying story)

Despite the township's concerns, Schmid noted Ontario's Green Energy Act has essentially handcuffed the township in its ability to stop the project.

"Municipalities have been reduced from approval authorities to commenting bodies only," said Schmid.

Mitchell Shnier, who helped organize Saturday's event, thanked township staff for their response but said municipal politicians have failed to take a stand on the issues.

"There has been no response from our local politicians...and most of the candidates (in the upcoming municipal election) have been just as wishy-washy as the current councillors," said Shnier. "They have to take a strong stand on the falls."

Shnier said Swift River is glossing over the facts on the project, and a wider search needs to be conducted to find a more suitable site.

Alice Murphy, a director with Save the Bala Falls, said it's up to the constituents to force the issue in every

ward during the upcoming election.

"I'm not saying we need to change councillors but we need to change what's happening in council," said Murphy. "We as a community are not powerless. It's a question of having our voice heard."

Murphy also added that opponents of the project need to inundate the Ministry of the Environment in an effort to "bump up" the classification of project and force a more extensive analysis.

"Guess what? It's not over," said Murphy to loud applause.

During a question and answer period several members of the public took the opportunity to grill the municipal politicians on why they haven't taken a stronger stand.

Ellis eventually took the podium to defend the township's position and emphasize that there was little the township could do to put the brakes on the process.

"We are under the Green Energy Act and we have to follow the legal process whether we like it or not," said Ellis.

The mayor said the township could pass a bylaw in opposition to the project but it would likely do little good in the long run.

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