

Letter to the Editor, Gravenhurst Banner

April 19, 2010

The recent article by Karen Longwell regarding the proposed hydroelectric project in Bala lacks balance and is short on facts.

In spite of the proponent's furious spin to the contrary, the proposed construction of an industrial hydroelectric generating station in the middle of the Bala Falls has serious environmental issues that need to be addressed.

This process is ongoing. The Ministry of the Environment is still reviewing information provided by the community and the proponent and at no point has the go-ahead been given for Swift River to start construction. It is no surprise that the OPA would like to purchase power from Swift River, but the proponent has not received the crucial approval from the Ministry of the Environment to clear cut the trees, blast the rock face, build a power station or generate electricity.

An unprecedented number of concerned stakeholders have written letters to the Ministry of the Environment requesting an elevation of the Environmental Screening process to a more rigorous Individual Environmental Assessment.

At issue is the preservation of Bala's key economic, cultural and tourism asset, the Bala Falls, a public resource in the centre of town, shared by thousands of people from far and wide. The proposal put forward by Swift River would result in over 95% of the current scenic flow over the falls being diverted instead through a newly built hydroelectric generating station.

Envision the Bala Falls as the community's "anchor tenant". We know what happens to a shopping mall when it loses its key tenant; it begins a slow decline to oblivion. Bala faces a similar fate without the Bala Falls. After a projected eighteen months to two years of blasting, heavy construction and traffic chaos, what will be the end result? Increased danger in, on and next to the water, dramatically restricted public access, loss of scarce fish spawning areas, the falls reduced by 95% to a trickle, and the historic site replaced with a concrete structure. The anchor tenant will be lost, and so will Bala.

So, what is the net benefit? The taxpayers of Ontario would be subsidizing this private company in the neighbourhood of \$500,000 to \$1,000,000 per year while at the same time fewer and fewer people will be drawn to Bala to admire the natural beauty and support the local economy. This is not a net benefit. This would leave Bala high, and literally dry, with its cultural and economic future given away.

Karen McGhee, the Swift River project manager, is quoted as being “blown away about how much misinformation there is out there”. The Environmental Assessment process puts the responsibility entirely on the proponent, being Swift River, to ensure that all public stakeholders are provided with all of the necessary information required to respond to the social and economic impacts under consideration. So, rather than being “blown away” Swift River should ensure that questions asked are in fact answered.

In Swift River’s written response to the SaveTheBalaFalls.com’s Elevation Request, 68 out of 69 questions were simply not answered. We still don’t know what the proposed facility will look like, the economic impact, the water and land restrictions, or the rescue scenarios, to name just a few of the major unknowns. The proponent's answers have been consistently superficial and failed to address the detailed questions asked and the issues raised. In their responses and meetings, the proponent has just repeated the public relations responses which “answer the questions they **wished** we asked”. The proponent has not answered the questions the community did ask.

Important community organizations continue to work to demonstrate the folly of this proposal to destroy Bala's most important economic asset in order to enrich private investors.

It appears that only an elevation which requires the proponent to fully answer significant safety, social and economic questions will provide the necessary framework to get the information needed to fairly review the environmental impact of this project proposal.

SaveTheBalaFalls.com