

[Back to The battle for Bala Falls](#)

The battle for Bala Falls

July 12, 2010

John Spears

Green energy comes at a price. Some people in the Muskoka village of Bala aren't sure they want to pay it.

It's not the money that worries them, but the fate of Bala Falls, the community's signature attraction, and the site of a proposed new generating station.

"It's going to stop the water going over the falls," says life-long Bala resident Mark Gidley, who runs a real estate business in town.

"You go to a mall because there's a key tenant. Bala's going to lose its key tenant."

The power developer, Swift River Energy Ltd. insists that at least during the key tourist months, water will flow undiminished over the falls. And project manager Karen McGhee says that if Bala is like a mall, it's already in trouble.

"From a socioeconomic standpoint, the businesses in the Town of Bala have seen steady decline for decades," McGhee wrote in an e-mail.

"Our mitigation plan for this is to build a public use lookout and seating area above our powerhouse, with hopefully some well-done landscaping, interpretive signage, possibly some local art," she said in an interview.

"Hopefully it's going to be a draw to the public. This could enhance the area that is already having some decline."

The Bala Falls development grew out of Ontario's push for green power. Swift River was awarded a contract in April.

It's not a pristine site. The bridge supporting Bala Falls Road spans the top of the falls, which spills the water from Lake Muskoka into the Moon River in two flows, split by an island. The rocky north falls are the scenic part, where swimmers can scramble among the rocks and water.

A railway bridge spans the water above the falls, and dams control the flow over the falls. It has been the site of a small hydro station before, now disused.

Swift River will install a culvert from the top of the south falls, which carry most of the water, and route water into a turbine station to be built on the island between the two falls. The top of the culvert, screened by a metal grate, will protrude slightly above the surface.

Upstream from the culvert intake, floating barriers will be installed to keep boats from being swept toward the power station intake.

The concrete turbine station won't be significantly higher than the existing rocks, the company says. It will be landscaped; the flat top of the building will be open to the public.

That's little comfort to Mitchell Shnier, a long-time cottage owner on nearby Long Lake, who frequently walks in to Bala and enjoys the falls. The power station will bar the public from hundreds of feet of shoreline around the intake culvert, he says. And landscaping is futile.

"You can't disguise this thing," says Shnier. "At best it would look like the landscaping at a Toronto condominium. People don't go to Bala to see the kind of professionally landscaped garden you have above a concrete parking garage in Toronto."



Bala Falls in Muskoka, as seen in an archive photo.

The Muskoka Steamship and Historical Society

The Muskoka Lakes Chamber of Commerce, whose office is in Bala, has taken no formal position on the power development. But president Tracy Owen says the chamber wants a thorough economic impact study and environmental assessment to be done before it proceeds.

Two years of heavy construction in the heart of the town could play havoc with businesses that rely heavily on a short tourist season she said.

"To my knowledge, there has never been a hydro generating station of this magnitude built in the heart of a community," she said in a letter last month to the environment ministry. "There would be no way to predict the impact and/or damage to the community without a full and comprehensive study."

Or as Owen put it in an interview:

"It might be a small town for some people, but it's a big one for us." she said.

Mark Gidley says he's not reassured by promises that there will be enough water in summer to keep the falls going and to feed the electric station. He's seen big variations in water levels over his 63 years.

He, too, is worried by construction chaos.

"It's shutting the town down for two years," he said. "And at the end we don't know what volume of water will be going over the falls."

Town councilor Mary Grady, who's also deputy mayor of Muskoka Lakes, supports calls for more economic study. She also wants to see more water safety data, concerned about the danger of boaters and swimmers being swept toward the intake.

"In the seven years I've been a councillor, there hasn't been a project that's been more emotional than this one," says Grady.

She says a number of townsfolk have told her they're on favour of green power, but none speak out openly for the Bala Falls project because of the emotions expressed at public meetings:

"If you weren't in favour of the project being stopped, then you were against Bala. I think many chose to say nothing."

A decision on whether to order further study of the project could come this month.