

Council delays decision on Bala Falls project

Proposed hydro-electric station threatens to destroy scenic Muskoka landmark, opponents claim

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Business Reporter

PORT CARLING - The Township of Muskoka Lakes didn't say Yes to a proposed hydro-electric project at Bala Falls Tuesday. But it didn't say No, either.

And that infuriated opponents of the project, who say it will wreck the scenic Bala Falls.

They accused the developer, Swift River Energy Ltd., of bludgeoning the council into submission with threats of building an even less acceptable project.

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Visitors enjoy the north Bala Falls. A hydroelectric project is proposed for an area next to the dam.

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Swift River's project manager Karen McGhee in turn accused opponents of the project of making "bogus claims that confound the issues and muddy the waters" of the proposed development.

"Emotional over-reaction and political expediency does not make for good decision-making," McGhee told a township council meeting Tuesday.

The meeting had been forced to adjourn from the township hall and reconvene in the nearby community centre because about 80 people tried to jam into the council chamber, which is more than the fire limit.

The project is one of many "green energy" initiatives being promoted by the provincial government that have raised local opposition.

Swift River wants to build a new power station on the island that splits Bala Falls into a north section, through which most of the water pours, and the south section, in which water cascades pleasingly over a jumble of rocks.

Opponents say the station could reduce the south falls to a trickle at times.

Swift River says the proposed 4.5 megawatt station, costing \$23 million, will scarcely alter the profile of the existing island.

But if Muskoka Lakes turns against the project, and persuades Muskoka District – which owns the land – to turn against it, the company has an alternative, McGhee noted.

It will build a somewhat smaller 3.5 megawatt station on adjacent provincial land, but it will be a much more obtrusive structure in the landscape.

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