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## Keep your election promise, Bala residents tell Doug Ford

By **ROB FERGUSON** Queen's Park Bureau  
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Cottagers and residents in the Bala Falls area are calling on Premier Doug Ford to keep a campaign promise and shut down a hydroelectric project in the Muskoka town before it's too late.

Ford called the project, which is now [under construction](#), a “big scam” during the Progressive Conservative leadership campaign. He blamed the Liberal government for it and pledged, “As premier I will clean up this mess. I will be back here in this same spot and we will stop this project.”



Residents went to the Bala Falls bridge a week after this spring's Ontario election to remind Doug Ford of his campaign promise to stop construction of the Swift River hydro plant. (LINDA JACKSON-HUTTON PHOTO)

But his government hasn't taken any action since the June 7 election — and a news release last week from Environment Minister Rod Phillips seemed to fall short of Ford's promise.

The release said the government would “respond to concerns raised by the community about projects such as the North Bala Small Hydro Project, which is proceeding subject to a number of permits and approvals in place that require the facility to operate in the most environmentally responsible way.”

That sounds like a lot of “spin” from Ford's publicity machine, Mitchell Shnier of the activist group [SaveTheBalaFalls.com](http://SaveTheBalaFalls.com) said Tuesday.

Shnier and other opponents of the [hydroelectric project](#) on the Muskoka town's picturesque Moon River cascade are worried that if construction is allowed to continue at its current speedy rate, it will soon be too late to reverse.

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“We are going to hold him to his word and sincerely hope we aren’t sold out,” he said, citing fears for boater and swimmer safety from water intakes.

“This doesn’t get him out of his promise,” said Shnier, a Toronto resident and Bala-area cottager for 44 years, who called the consultation promise “vague.”

The news release from Phillips, which promised \$5 million for “watershed conservation” in Muskoka, came out last Wednesday afternoon, but was overshadowed by the Ford administration’s bombshell announcement on sex education consultations and a “snitch line” for concerned parents to report teachers using the modernized sex education curriculum in schools since 2015.

“We are providing real solutions to the issues facing the Muskoka region while supporting residents, the local economy and a thriving recreational and tourist industry,” Phillips stated in the news release.

His spokesman, Andrew Brander, said Tuesday that the advisory group “will also respond directly to the concerns raised by the community” about the hydroelectric project at the falls.

“By protecting this particular watershed and working with the local community, this initiative will help us develop a more comprehensive approach to watershed management, which can inform current actions and future development,” Brander said.

New Democrat MPP Jennifer French (Oshawa) said Ford “has some serious explaining to do” for saying one thing during the leadership race and doing another now that he’s premier.

“Back room deals and favours to friends and lobbyists come first,” added French, her party’s infrastructure critic.

“The Bala Falls generating station is a private contract to produce power that’s not needed in a town that doesn’t want it. Ford should respect the community.”

At 4.7 megawatts, the project at Bala’s north dam would produce enough electricity to power 4,000 homes — an amount Shnier called “piddly.”

The project’s developer, Swift River Energy Ltd., said construction is “quite advanced” and the project is on track for completion early next summer.

“We’re carrying on with business as usual,” said Nhung Nguyen, vice-president of development, adding that all approvals are in place.

“We remain committed to working with the government and stakeholders on any issues that arise.”

In its June newsletter, Swift River said workers have excavated rock to a depth of 21 metres for a power house and a “tailrace,” where water exits the plant back into the river.

Some of the rock will be used to build a park next to the facility. In mid-June, construction crews began pouring 5,000 cubic metres of concrete — enough to fill two Olympic-sized swimming pools — to shape the powerhouse. That work will continue until late fall.

The park will feature an observation deck overlooking the river, more parking spaces and additional fish habitat, with the entire project expected to be completed in 2019.

Swift River has said previously that water will not be diverted from the popular falls, except during runoff periods in the spring and fall, ensuring the scenic cascades will not dry up.

“The flow during the tourist season, which is in the summer, will not change over those falls,” Swift River’s Karen McGhee told the Star in 2012.

Rob Ferguson is a Toronto-based reporter covering Ontario politics. Follow him on Twitter: [@robferguson1](https://twitter.com/robferguson1)



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