

Over 200 activists protest Doug Ford's Bala hydro plant broken promise

ISSUE: Broken promise to cancel the Bala hydro plant project

IMPACT: Hydro bills and local environment

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Katie Tsuyuki, Grayson Traske and Kelly Zavitz attend the Save the Bala Falls protest. Sept. 2018. - Agatha Farmer/Metroland



Bala community members attend the Save the Bala Falls protest. Sept. 2018. - Agatha Farmer/Metroland



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BALA — Around 200 people took over the Bala bridge on Sept. 1 as part of a [Save the Bala Falls](#) protest following Doug Ford's statement last week that he will not cancel the hydro project.

On Aug. 29, [Premier Doug Ford said at a news conference](#) in Milton that he had to break his promise to stop a hydroelectric project at picturesque Bala Falls because cancelling the power plant "would cost taxpayers an absolute fortune."

"I wish you could cancel it but the problem is you leave a big hole in the ground," said Ford

He estimated the cost of axing the North Bala Small Hydro Project being built by Swift River Energy Ltd. at up to \$100 million and blamed the previous Liberal government for approving it years ago.

"We have information that it would not cost that much to cancel this project, and yet they won't meet with us." Mitchell Shnier

"It's frustrating, to say the least," added Ford, who evaded a question on whether he was unaware of likely cancellation costs last [February when he was in the Bala area during the Progressive Conservative leadership race](#) and made his promise.

His broken promise prompted local activists and residents to organize a protest; among the organizers was longtime opponent of the project Mitchell Shnier. Shnier said community members are looking for a meeting with Ford and Parry Sound Muskoka MPP Norm Miller to discuss the possibility of cancelling the plant without any significant costs to the taxpayers. Shnier did not reveal how the group plans on accomplishing this, just that they require a meeting.

"Ever since the election the community has been sending Norm Miller emails, letters and he hasn't said a thing ... we have information that it would not cost that much to cancel this project, and yet they won't meet with us so clearly they are only listening to the proponents' lobbyists and they are not informing themselves first. That's our complaint, because on what information do they feel that the cancellation costs would be \$42 million?" said Shnier.

When further asked on how the Save the Bala Falls group plans on cancelling the project without the associated costs Ford outlined Shnier said "this is a complicated situation and it's not just an email we can explain briefly, it's a meeting we have to have ... it's more about Doug Ford's reputation, his trust, his promise made, and promise kept."

MPP Norm Miller said it is "time to move on."

"This has been going on for some 12 years and the project is getting close to being completed. I think there is a time to move forward and I think that time is now," said Miller.

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Miller disagreed with the idea that Ford never met with Bala constituents.

“He has done a lot of work in trying to keep his commitment and I know the ministers and premier have met with people opposed to the project and obviously used government resources to establish what it would cost to stop the project at this late date. The premier also made the promise to be fiscally responsible and it would just cost too much. The estimated cost is \$40 to \$100 million to cancel the project at this late date,” said Miller.

Miller acknowledged while the government did cancel over 700 green projects in July, those were at earlier stages of construction than the Bala plant.

“I certainly understand that there are people who are disappointed, including Mitchell, who I met with on several occasions, that we are unable to cancel the project ... it just wouldn't be fiscally responsible.

“I think the premier made the original commitment in good faith based on the information he had at his disposal at the time, but you don't have all the information until you get into government. I can tell that he is a person who very much believes in keeping his word and he has been agonizing in trying to keep this promise and doing all the due diligence, but he also made the commitment to be fiscally responsible and to get the province back on track,” said Miller

Local councillor Ruth Ellen Nishikawa took part in the protest along with mayoral candidate Phil Harding and said Bala is a strong community.

“This is not a personal thing for myself this is me speaking up for the community. We are not going to get the hydro generated out of this ... it's about these peoples' pocket books and how they are going to be affected,” said Nishikawa.