

Muskoka Lakes comes out swinging against Swift River denying water permit

Muskoka Lakes is asking the province to deny Swift River's water permit and prohibit the company to operate during in recreational season from May to Nov.

News 02:27 PM by [Agatha Farmer](#) Gravenhurst Banner



Muskoka Lakes Mayor Phil Harding discusses the Bala falls water permit for Swift River Energy Limited with Bill Purkis, owner of Purk's Place. January 2019. - Agatha Farmer/Metroland



Mitchell Shnier a member of the SaveTheBalaFalls.com group is fighting for public safety at the Bala hydro electric project. - Agatha Farmer/Metroland

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PORT CARLING — Muskoka lakes council is fighting back against Swift River Energy Limited and has asked the province to deny permission to take water in Bala.

At a Jan. 18 meeting councillors voted unanimously on a resolution to deny Swift River's application for a permit to take water. The province has requested comments and gave the township 30 days to respond to the application prior to granting the permit through the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks.

Council listed a number of concerns cited on the lengthy resolution among those is that the approval of the project was based on marine navigation and did not assess the dangers of in-water recreation, that the Environmental Screening Report completed in 2009 does not include data from 2013 and 2016 floods which occurred in Muskoka nor does it address climate change, and that in recent years the operation of hydro electric generating stations has caused drownings due to in water recreational activities highlighting the issue of public safety in a key tourist area. The township also addressed the issue that it remains an unwilling host for this project.

As a result, Muskoka Lakes requested the province deny Swift River permission to take water due to negative impacts and at a minimum not allow water to be drawn during the in-water recreational period

from May 15 to Nov. 1. The township has also asked the ministry to undertake studies to fully understand in water recreation and to update the environmental screening report prior to any drawing of water to ensure protection of the environment.

"Protect Bala's residents, businesses and visitors when you reply to their request." Bill Purkis
Bill Purkis addressed councillors in a deputation and explained that his family has owned Purk's Place on Lake Muskoka adjacent to the North Falls in Bala since 1908.

"Among other things we rent all kinds of boats; canoes, kayaks, paddle boats, fishing boats and ski boats, we also rent dock space ... our 150 feet of dock space is a busy place. I'm here to talk about my concerns for the safety of the public in and around the water by the north channel," said Purkis
"Traditionally the south falls is taken almost all the flow in the summer time and the reason for that is it protects the township dock as well as Purk's Place from turbulent water and dangerous flows, 99 cubic meters per second would move from the south channel to the north channel. All the turbulence would now be through the north channel ... and as a matter of fact the south channel was blasted deeper in the 1950s so enable more flow through the south channel."

Purkis asked councillors to do what they can "to protect Bala's residents, businesses and visitors when you reply to their request."

Coun. Peter Kelly wanted to clarify if the water request was an initial ask or a renewal. Upon being told that it was an initial request Kelly then asked "How did this get so far down the trail that nobody has ever thought of this or asked these questions before. I'm just wondering is this not part of a normal environmental review or agreements prior to construction, I mean this isn't something that just occurred to them."

Coun. Ruth Nishikawa explained that much of this information was in fact brought forth to the former Liberal government. Purkis followed up Nishikawa's comment and said that [this is not the first time the community has asked for a public safety plan from the government or the proponent.](#)

[Mitchell Shnier](#) began his deputation by illustrating that in Muskoka it's common to fall out of a canoe, however, falling out of a canoe should not be the last thing a person does.

His concern is the intake for the generating station which according to Shnier is 35 feet deep and 40 feet wide and 100 tons of water per second would flow into the intake at the north channel beside municipal docks.

“That is equivalent to 65 cars per second and that’s a huge force. The concern that people could fall off the dock at Purk’s Place or the municipal docks just upstream of that would get carried down the north channel and this is where they would end up being held under water and this is a public safety concern,” Shnier said.

Councillors discussed township liability should an incident ever occur in Bala, as well as the fact that there are residential docks in the immediate falls area and the plant might impact the safety of the recreational usage of those residents.

Mayor Phil Harding clarified that if the township is aware of something and may be concerned about safety “we need to alert the province who is mandating this which removes some of our liability and we need to do what we can to protect our residents. The fact is we do have a public dock within 100 feet of this and we have a business that’s promoting tourism with community people coming to the area taking fishing boats, getting in canoes, we have divers point. I think it’s appropriate for us to send our notes ... and if mom and dad at Queen's Park want to tell us what we are doing then that will be their liability and not ours.”

Swift River Energy Limited emailed a statement to this newspaper regarding the safety concerns addressed at the Jan. 17 meeting.

“Safety is an important priority for the project and it is a significant part of the oversight the province provides on projects like ours. We have filed a detailed Public Safety Plan that the province considered as part of their approval for the project to proceed. We believe our formal plan fully addresses the issues that the community has raised, and it satisfied the regulators. The plan will be released once the power plant is complete to incorporate as-built conditions.

The safety procedures and protocols we are implementing include: construction safety strategies and plans for the construction period, safe operating guidelines for the plant and all of the people working there, buoys and signage to identify hazards for boaters and the public, as well as public communication requirements and standards to share information about hazards. Sixty per cent of Canada's electricity is supplied by hundreds of hydro plants just like Bala's. By following best practices and guidelines, everyone can stay safe.”