

FRONT PORCH PERSPECTIVE:

By Stephen Somerville

As reported in The Auroran this month, Council unanimously approved a motion from Councillor John Abel, which calls on staff to prepare a budget for a Community Energy Plan which is intended to support local development, fostering behavioural change, and a culture of conservation within the municipality.

According to the article, 'The Community Energy Plan is an opportunity to build on Aurora's existing Corporate Energy Action Plan, approved in 2014 with the development of the Town's Environmental Advisory Committee, which outlines energy efficiencies at the municipal level.'

I applaud the motion. Anything that we can do to protect our environment and lessen the amount of energy that we consume is a good idea.

I just hope, however, that Council and our community keep its collective eye on the ball, which means sensibly and actively participating in the discussions regarding the Region's over-all long terms energy needs.

As everyone knows, York region is one of the fastest growing regions in Canada, and along with this growth comes an appetite for power. The overriding issue is that we do in fact need new sources of power in York region (at some point in time) to maintain our standard of living and way of life.

Communities cannot and should not grow unless energy needs are part of the equation. Just as we would not allow homes to be built without adequate provisions for water, sewage, schools and roads, nor should we allow development without a real plan for our power needs.

There is also the critical issue of balancing larger community interests vs. local interests that is the provincial government mandate of ensuring that the lights stay on vs. local governments' right to say no to a particular power project. It is a delicate balancing act. Currently, as part of the province's long term energy planning efforts, the Independent Electricity System Operator (IESO) wants to know if the long term energy needs in northern York Region can be met by a combination of conservation and distributed energy resources (DER) rather than by transmission/distribution lines.

The sixth meeting of the York Region Local Advisory Committee (LAC) took place a couple of weeks back at Brevik Hall in the Aurora Cultural Centre.

The LAC will examine different examples of DERs: small gas-fired generators, micro-grids, energy storage, Combined Heat and Power for business, residential Demand response and renewable generation like solar.

We are going to have to get comfortable with the concept of distributed generation in our neighborhoods; that is these small power plants in close proximity to actual load requirements.

But there is a lot of work to do to see if some or all of these potential DER's can work. Otherwise, either new or enhanced transmission/distribution line(s) running through Aurora may be in our future at some point.

An important consideration is obviously the cost of the various energy alternatives.

And various questions flow from this.

To wit:

If a community prefers a certain option should that preference be paid for by the community or all Ontarians?

Secondly, if in the future a generation facility of a reasonable size could not be sited in close proximity to the current Aurora transmission line, who should pay if an ultimate decision was made to go with an underground transmission line upgrade?

Other questions quickly come to mind: Should it be Aurora homeowners or York Region ratepayers or provincial taxpayers as a whole? Individual costs will be reduced the greater the area this concentric cost ring becomes. But, if Aurora did not want to have its own generating station (at some point in the future), then I can't see the good citizens of Markham or Newmarket paying for our underground transmission lines.

As an incentive, if a community takes on the burden of generation to meet a system-wide need and not to meet a local reliability need, then why shouldn't that community receive some type of benefit like reduced energy bills for residents or the community should be provided with a community vibrancy/benefits fund?

I will re-iterate what I stated in an earlier column on this subject: As someone who has made a living in the electricity sector for the last seventeen years, and as someone who has watched the generation versus transmission line alternatives play out in other areas of this province, I offer two pieces of advice:

First, to my fellow Aurorans, become fully engaged early on in this process, as the various options can have big impacts on our community.

Second, to the IESO's Technical Working Group: As early as you can in this process, you need to lay out the alternatives side by side ? DER versus transmission (and how much conservation can potentially assist) ? in a clear, and easy to understand way. This comparison chart needs to include the costs, the various impacts and the timelines.

Stephen can be contacted at
stephengsomerville@yahoo.com