

FRONT PORCH PERSPECTIVE: Energy 2

Siting of Large Energy Infrastructure Projects ? Part II

By Stephen Somerville

In my last column I mentioned that an important public policy consultation had been taking place across Ontario this summer that has really gone under the radar.

The Minister of Energy tasked the Ontario Power Authority (OPA) and the Independent Electricity System Operator (IESO) back in mid-June with leading public consultations into the siting of large energy infrastructure projects in Ontario. The OPA and the IESO were to make recommendations to the Minister by August 1st.

I attended a couple of the public consultations where some very good discussion and debate was generated.

There were two central topics and four associated questions for each topic that were used to guide the discussion during these consultations.

The first hour dealt with the Regional Electricity Planning Process while the other central topic was the actual siting of large energy infrastructure and allocating responsibilities and costs.

The forty-five page OPA/IESO Report, entitled 'Engaging Local Communities in Ontario's Electricity Planning Continuum?', was made public on August 5.

All in all, not a bad effort as the OPA/IESO was under a short turnaround time and they had to balance the expectations of a large number of stakeholders with often competing electricity notions.

? There are three core recommendations outlined in the Report:

? Strengthen processes for early and sustained engagement with local governments and the public;

? Provide local governments and communities with a greater voice and responsibility in planning and siting; and

? Support inter-ministerial coordination.

The report then provides a further fifteen recommendations under core objectives like; Bringing Communities to the Table, Linking Local and Provincial Planning, Reinforcing the Planning/Siting Continuum and Enhancing Electricity Awareness and Improving Access to Information.

But what does this mean for us here in Aurora and for our local politicians?

The four recommendations under the section, Linking Local and Provincial Planning, offer a clue:

? Integrate electricity needs into relevant municipal plans;

? Integrate relevant municipal information into regional electricity plans;

? Promote community energy planning; and

? Recognize broader provincial and local interests in electricity system planning.

For our community, the report outlines that earlier and more meaningful dialogue and direct community engagement when choosing electricity options ? be it conservation, transmission or generation alternatives ? will take place.

Our local politicians will also be given more opportunity for input into the process, but they will also be given more formal responsibility in electricity matters.

The OPA/IESO are looking to strengthen the 'Provincial Policy Statement of 2005 which provides guidance to municipalities as they prepare or review their Official Plans, and should be modified to include a more explicit requirement for municipalities to consider electricity needs in relevant municipal plans'?

To me it looks a lot like the government may want to duplicate the process used in land planning. The provincial government a number of years ago introduced the Places to Grow Act whereby they set intensification targets across the province and the various regions/ municipalities had a certain amount of time to have their own local Official Plans reflect the provincial goals.

In this case, the Ministry of Energy, utilizing the expertise of both the OPA and the IESO, would produce (after public and industry stakeholdering) an updated version of the provincial Long Term Energy Plan.

The plan would contain regional power initiatives, and local municipalities would have to incorporate this into their own local community energy plans.

The OPA/IESO also recommends creating regional electricity planning Advisory Committees, with members to include ?elected officials, economic development officers and other community/business representatives.?

Page eleven of the Report states ?The Advisory Committee should be consulted regarding local priorities to be considered in the planning process when assessing alternative solutions for meeting the region's electricity needs. The Committee should be informed of the costs and benefits of alternative solutions.?

The OPA/IESO also recommends increased support for community energy planning. ?Comprehensive energy planning includes consideration of electricity as well as natural gas, district energy and transportation? In the longer term, this might include exploring a mandatory requirement to include energy targets in Official Plans, such as in B.C.?

While the report did recommend giving local communities a seat at the regional electricity planning table to ensure that their interests are included, the OPA/IESO did not promise to provide them with an outright veto over the siting of new generation in their community.

More on this point and local power reliability requirements versus a province-wide system need for power ? and the associated responsibilities and cost allocation - in my next column.

Stephen can be contacted at
stephensomerville@yahoo.com