

Lake associations fight to end mining in NH

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By Nate Smelle

Since Pancontinental Resources walked away from the McBride mining project in Limerick Township last March, one might think the fight to stop mining in the area was over and won. While those opposing the project did see Pancon's decision as a victory in preserving the pristine natural environment that makes Limerick a popular destination for cottagers and tourists their battle is far from done. President of the Steenburg Lake Community Association, Pat Stallaert, and director of the Limerick Waterways Ratepayers Association, Ed Offshack have been working together to oppose mining in the area since September of 2018. After learning of the proposed mine at this time, their two associations joined forces to create a task force with the objective of protecting the local environment and economy from the contamination they fear will accompany any such operations.

Indication that the area is still threatened by potential mining projects came following the expiration of the McBride Project's Mining Exploration Plan in early May, when the project's lead geologist Derek McBride told Bancroft Moose FM that he remained interested in the project and had been shopping around for other potential investors. According to Stallaert, McBride was granted another two-year Mining Plan this past August. Although Limerick council had asked the province to let them know if McBride applied for another Mining Plan, Stallaert said they were not informed of his application until after it was already approved. Noting that the province was not legally obligated to inform the township about the application, Offshack added "They stuck to the bare minimum and they did not in any way embrace that there is local opposition. That was certainly disappointing to our community that the province would simply go and issue another two-year exploration plan approval without at a minimum notifying us in advance, even if not just seeking input."

While grateful that councils in Limerick Township and Tudor and Cashel have taken a strong stance against metals extraction mining in the area, Offshack said they are hoping to see neighbouring municipalities such as Wollaston Township and Marmora and Lake also step up to protect the local economy and the environment that allows it to thrive. One of the problems with a metals extraction mine in this part of Hastings County, he said is that it pits tourism-based economic development against industrial natural resources development. With the exception of the forestry industry, Offshack said the reality is that for the past 20 to 40 years since the end of metals extraction mining in the Bancroft area, the region's economy has shifted away from a natural resources and industrial base to tourism.

"We are very engaged with the local economy and we understand what is driving it today," said Offshack.

"We are behind economic development that relates to tourism which cottagers are part of and other recreational activities, be it ATVing or at this time of year snowmobiling. We aren't anti-natural resources because we all have good relationships with the logging industry. Metals mining would be something different and I think that's the key point here. Metals mining was something none of us bargained for when we made the choice to come to Center in North Hastings as our recreational destination of choice." Speaking to his own experience as a cottager in the area, Stallaert said he plans to spend a lot of time snowmobiling throughout North Hastings this winter with his neighbour. Explaining how important tourism and recreational activities such as snowmobiling are to the local economy, he said "These kind of activities bring an economic boom to the area. We stay in places, we eat and lodge, gas up and you name it. That's just a small example, but in other townships there are trailer parks that are a really big part of what they do. Wollaston comes to mind. They have a couple of really big groups and I know they are very closely connected to the current council there. Who wants to spend their time at a cottage or a trailer with the trucks blasting by all the time, and knowing that the wildlife it's all gone away because it can't be supported anymore? Everything is at risk."

Although evidence shows that contamination from the mining of heavy metals tends to take hundreds of thousands or even millions of years to clean up, Offshack said even if the damage to the environment were only to take 10 or 20 years to remediate, the impact to the tourism industry would still be devastating to the local economy in the short-term.

Acknowledging how the tourism industry has been booming in North Hastings for at least the last 20 years, Stallaert said all levels of government have recognized that the local economy is based on and driven by tourism. In light of the fact that Hastings County has invested in promoting the tourism industry through initiatives such as its "Wildly Authentic" marketing campaign, he wonders why county council and the province do not seem, to him, to be interested in protecting the natural landscape that compels people to come to North Hastings.

Why won't they provide us with a way to protect and support it [the nature-based tourism industry], rather than leaving us open to this potentially negative future, where we turn back the clocks 60 years to the world of dirty polluting metals mining which of course at one time did exist in this area. Those mines all played out and became economically unviable fairly quickly, leaving scars on the land, bankrupt towns and ghost towns.?

Offshack shares Stallaert's frustration. He said dealing with the different levels of government regarding this issue has for the most part been very disappointing. When it comes to the approval process for mining projects, he said both elected officials and full-time staff at the various levels of government ultimately allow the final decision to be determined by its economic merits. Offshack added While we might put up good environmental arguments, and while they may be considered upon their own merits by certain people who value environmental protection at all costs mostly environmental considerations are simply another 'cost' factored into the overall economic decision.?

Considering the provincial government would never allow a mining operation in a place such as downtown Toronto, Offshack said they would like to see North Hastings taken off the map of potential locations for mining exploration in Ontario as well. With 2020 just around the corner, Stallaert and Offshack said their task force of lake associations plan to continue raising awareness about the risks of mining in cottage country in the new year.