

Tallying hope for hydro

By Sarah Sobanski

Late last November, Hydro One put a moratorium on disconnects. For another winter, electricity will not be cut for those who can't afford their bills ? most with good reason.

Recently, I spoke with executive director of United Way of Bruce Grey Francesca Dobbyn, a woman who has been working to stop disconnects in Owen Sound, not unlike the members of our community. When it comes to the hydro fight she's stood out by standing up, landing interviews with the *Roy Green Show*, the *Globe and Mail*, and local media in Owen Sound.

Dobbyn said there are tons of groups that are involved including Facebook groups which she called informal, grassroots organizations popping up. In North Hastings we have Take Back Your Power Hydro Bills Unplugged. We've also heard about antipoverty groups such as Put Food In The Budget or North Hastings Community Trust. Political parties such as the NDP have come out and said stop the disconnects. She said that news of disconnects being stopped Nov. 25 was a victory for Ontario ? it's been a provincewide fight.

This year's moratorium comes a week or so earlier than Hydro One's usual policy to stop disconnects Dec. 1 to March 31. Dobbyn suggested this policy is just that, good company policy. It is at the whim of Hydro One whether it is enforced or not as the company is not held accountable by law if it disconnects people in the winter months.

At a whim, or not, a week earlier is better than a week later. There seems to finally be some shifting from the energy big-wigs. Premier Kathleen Wynne has labelled hydro prices a mistake, there is a Hydro One ombudsman sniffing about, there is a bill in the legislature attempting to take the power of disconnecting people from Hydro One and put it in the hands of the Ontario Energy Board.

Dobbyn said there are tons of people who have been working on this issue across the province. The United Way has been fighting energy poverty for over 10 years. In the last few years ? following the Hydro One billing scandals to the attempted and pending privatization of Hydro One to start ? Dobbyn said the climb in energy poverty has been crazy. She spoke of an instance where *Global News* ran a story on energy being so expensive because of the delivery charges. She called the reporter and told *Global News* she could ?run an extension cord through to our nuclear plant. It's that close. We generate 30 per cent of the power for Ontario in our back yard so it's not about how far it is.? She was speaking of Bruce Power.

It's clear looking at hydro bills from our area that there is something wrong with our billing system. Questions such as why is rural so much more or how can power not be considered a necessity before Dec. 1 in a country that regularly sees winter come the end of October come to mind.

We've been lucky so far this winter. There hasn't been a minus 20 degrees day ? but there could have been.

In a follow up interview with program co-ordinator for North Hastings Community Trust Jane Kali, she said she was happy a stop had been put to disconnects and that people had been fighting hard for the change, and to push hydro to more fair service. She also said however, that hydro needs to develop a fair strategy for rural Ontario. She said we don't want disconnects and load restrictions re-introduced in the spring without changes to rural service, specifically delivery charges.

With the many different factors that created the Hydro One implosion being felt by customers across the province, and the hydro bills themselves which are hard to understand from top to bottom, knowing where to turn or what to do next can be hard. Luckily, there are organizations within our community that can help, who can explain and who hope you'll participate in the campaign against unfair hydro. Stay strong, keep fighting ? today, one week earlier, tomorrow the whole year.

For those of us who are lucky enough to be able to afford our hydro bills in rural Ontario, remember community antipoverty groups this year while Christmas shopping. The snow has arrived and it doesn't seem to be going anywhere. A lot of people in our area could use a leg up out of it, and help to keep warm.