

Locals disappointed by ombudsman



Hydro One ombudsman Fiona Crean visited the Legion on Thursday, Oct. 6 to hear customer complaints and attempt to sort out misinformation and record wrong actions by Hydro One against locals. / SUBMITTED

By Sarah Sobanski

Hydro One ombudsman Fiona Crean didn't have the answers community members wanted.

Crean took to the Legion stage Thursday to meet and discuss Hydro One billing with local customers. Those in attendance all but put her on trial.

Sky-high hydro bills have left North Hastings locals facing energy poverty. They feel helpless and trampled by the ever-coming stampede they call Hydro One. They want answers and Crean seemed the first response to many unanswered questions.

'We're living in a time when the CRTC is telling people that low income people should have access to cable because it is a basic necessity,' stated a man at one of two mics set at the front of the room. He suggested people needed cable to stay informed. He wondered why it couldn't be the same for electricity where access is based on income. 'How come we can't have a set rate and have people pay for abuse? Make it like cable where if you want perks, where if you run your lights after business hours, you pay more.' Crean's position however, was built to advocate on the behalf of those wronged by Hydro One systemically. She takes back individual grievances for solutions and looks for patterns between the wrongs committed in order to develop larger solutions. She could not speak to policy, why not or what ifs.

'We're not living theoretical up here. So madam I come here as a community member,' condemned a woman. She said she didn't want to live closer to the city, that this land was her home, but some community members had no choice. 'I just sold my home out of town because I couldn't afford hydro. Your hydro bills are killing us. In 22 days my bill was over \$300 for a house of three people? we can't do this, we cannot sustain ourselves.'

When Crean did have answers they weren't enough. She shared with those who attended many of the things she found other customers in different areas didn't know. For example, delivery fees include infrastructure costs. Only about 39 per cent of customer dollars goes back to Hydro One, the rest goes elsewhere.

'Our lines were put in in 1942. It's out more than it's on. I own a trailer park I don't have 24 hours a day to get it fixed. They've been out [but] they need to come and fix it,' responded one man. Another couple said their hydro pole was on private property and because of that Hydro One refused to fix it.

Crean remained composed throughout the event, laughing with customers at the absurdity of the policy when she could. She said that she understood customer confusion and frustration. She assured those gathered that it was the same in other provinces, and that while she was new to her position and still in the early stages of understanding Hydro One, she would work to get results.

In the end, many of the audience left early, abandoning the meeting when it seemed Crean had no imminent solutions for them.

A few took to protesting outside in red pointed hats as a part of the gnomes for social justice and equality. They brought a letter they hoped to send to the energy minister asking that he come to Bancroft. Leading members of the community group suggested they

believed that the minister could make real change for those suffering in Bancroft. The group was scheduled to rally at Queen's Park Tuesday, Oct. 12.