

No room for misinterpretation in Limerick



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By Nate Smelle

Until last week, there had been little to report on the controversial mining project being proposed in Limerick Township known as the McBride project since the public meeting last September. That silence vanished during the council meeting on Feb. 19 following a presentation to Limerick council by Limerick Area Conservation Coalition members Nora and Dave Drennan.

The site of the proposed nickel, copper and cobalt mining operation that is currently being explored by Pancontinental Resources and Hastings Highlands Resources is an 890-hectare (2,200) in Limerick Township, approximately 25 kilometres south of Bancroft. Within the boundaries of the project there are several bodies of water that help define the area for those who live and cottage there as a premier tourist destination. In close proximity to the proposed drilling area there are also a variety of lakes ? Steenburg Lake, Dickey Lake, Limerick Lake, Perch Lake, Brooks Lake, Second Lake, Paddy's Lake ? that are all part of the Crowe Valley Watershed and Beaver Creek Watershed.

For the past month, Dave told council that members of LACC had been going door-to-door to engage with residents and find out where the community stands in terms of the McBride project. So far, of the 42 community members they have spoken with, he said 37 were opposed to the development of the mine, one was in favour, and five abstained from voting until they had more information. In addition, Dave said LACC has also gathered 2,326 signed petitions online and 376 signed hard copies, all opposing the mine. The Drennan's took turns explaining to council why LACC, along with the overwhelming majority of Limerick residents oppose the mine. Highlighting a report from Mining Watch Canada, Nora explained that a mine the size and type necessary to extract the foreseen quantity of minerals already known to exist on this site would produce more than five million tons of acid-generating toxic wastewater ? a sulphuric acid solution composed of heavy metals such as aluminum, nickel, copper, manganese, arsenic, lead and cobalt. Another reason for opposing the mine, she said is that the Ontario government is already spending \$1.2 billion to clean up 47 contaminated mining sites throughout the province, and it can ?take hundreds of thousands of years for some sites to become acid-neutral and stop leaching into the environment.?

The couple's presentation reminded me of a conversation I had with the project's lead geologist Derek McBride last August. At the time, McBride asserted that none of the toxic wastewater generated by the mining operation would enter Steenburg Lake. Shockingly, he also told me that ?the Phillips Marsh drains down Nicholson Creek and goes into Dickey Lake, and the swamp on the north side of the site flows into Sweets Lake.?

Even if by some miracle the acidic wastewater generated by a mining operation only metres away from Steenburg Lake does not make it into the water, does this make the irreversible damage that will admittedly be done to Sweets Lake, the Phillips Marsh, Nicholson Creek and Dickey Lake any less devastating? Is it not possible that waterfowl, mammals and amphibians using the contaminated water sources could enter other lakes in the area and therefore expand the boundaries of contamination?

While the Drennan's raised many questions, they also provided council with a number of opportunities to join their constituents in opposing the mine. Indicating that Pancon and HHR would need to submit an application for an exploratory permit to the Ontario Ministry of Northern Development and Mines before May, Dave informed council that if they are granted this permit they would be allowed to do more extensive exploratory work such as drilling, trenching and extracting bedrock. As soon as this application is submitted, he said the public has 30 days to voice their opposition. Acknowledging that the OMNDM 'take public opinion seriously,' he requested that council consider passing a resolution stating their opposition to the mine.

Making one of the clearest declarations I have ever heard from an elected official, Reeve Carl Stephanski stated that 'council is definitely opposed to the mine. We just do not want to see a mine coming into the area and putting a scar on our township. It's not right.'

From that point on, the meeting seemed to transform into an open discussion between members of council and their constituents. When asked whether MP Mike Bossio and MPP Daryl Kramp shared council's views regarding the mine, Stephanski said he was unsure but planned to speak with each of them to seek their support.

'What if they won't help?' asked one of the LACC members from the crowd.

Without hesitation, Stephanski replied 'Well, if we get enough people and we rent enough buses we can just go to Queen's Park and protest like every other interest group wants to do and block off University Ave.'

'I'm a bus driver,' added LACC's Monica Nikopoulos.

While fence-riding tends to be a skill unique to many politicians, there was no room for misinterpreting council's position regarding the proposed mining operation. In my experience at least, it is rare to see elected officials engage with the community in such an open, honest and transparent manner. Witnessing the hands-on democracy underway in Limerick left me feeling inspired and hopeful for the future of North Hastings. Let's hope it's contagious.