

Solar projects get mixed reviews in Wollaston

By Jim Eadie

Since the launch of the Ontario 'Feed In Tariff' (FIT) renewable energy program in 2009, projects proposed by developers in Wollaston Township and other North Hastings municipalities have received mixed reviews. The program, intended to encourage clean energy industries and jobs for Ontario, brings project developers with investors behind them to local council meetings looking for important municipal support for their project applications.

In North Hastings, these projects usually are installations of several acres of solar panels on land near larger hydro lines, and on rural land that is described by developers at Wollaston council meetings over the past few years as 'unproductive?', and inexpensive as land prices go. The provincial application process encourages developers to solicit municipal support, but does not require it, and in any event municipalities cannot block any application approved by the province. Often the developer seeks out rural land to lease from a landowner for 20 years providing income for a landowner with someone else investing in the cost of the installation. Rates paid to investors for the electricity generated are well above the rates Ontario Power Generation (OPG) can sell the product to Ontario customers, and acts as an incentive subsidy.

In Jan 2013, the previous council heard then Reeve Dan McCaw question who after 20 years was going to guarantee the clean up of tons of metal, and other possibly dangerous or un-recyclable industrial materials sitting in a field. McCaw and others chaffed about the provincial rules that allow the projects to step around the local municipal building permit process, and generating 'not one penny?' of property tax revenue for the municipality. Additionally, little local employment could be foreseen over the life of the projects.

Following the Jan 2013 discussion, grudging municipal support was given for a project proposed on Obrien's Rd. near the Lower Faraday Road, realizing the project could not be stopped by the municipality, and not wanting to stand in the way of the approximately \$16,000 per year income for the local landowner.

On June 9 this year, the matter was returned to an almost completely new elected Wollaston council due to a small 'fly in the ointment?'. The investor (Peterborough Solar Projects Corporation - PSPC) had discovered they needed to upgrade the last 430 meters of hydro line on Obrien's Rd., which is located on the road allowance owned by the municipality, and required approval from the township.

Councillor Michael Fuerth was not happy. 'By supporting this, we are supporting the 54 cents per kilowatt hour they will be paid for their electricity,' he said. 'I have a very difficult time supporting solar projects; it is a very very inefficient energy source. Every solar energy project approved raises the cost of electricity bills.'

'A lot of families here have huge hydro bills that they can't pay,' said Councillor Lynn Krueger.

'This application was supported by a previous council, and approved by the FIT program,' said township clerk Jennifer Cohen.

'Now they need a new line.'

Council voted down the request for permission with two voting members out of five absent from the meeting.

'I will advise them,' said Cohen. No-one from PSPC had attended the meeting to support their request.

At the next Wollaston regular meeting with everyone now present held on Jun 23, a delegation led by Kyle Weese representing the developer Renewable Environmental Energy Services asked for a reconsideration by council of its June 9th decision.

'Last meeting, we barely had a quorum,' noted Reeve Graham Blair. 'I feel it is inconsistent of the municipality not to support the request.'

'There are risks here, I am dead set against solar panels,' said Fuerth. 'There are risks involved in making and disposing of these panels. We are here to help families, not hurt them. Hydro rates are high, and projects like this are what are driving these costs. The more solar goes into the mix, the higher rates go. There is other renewable energy out there, at much lower cost. Even the Ontario Power Authority is not in favour of solar 'it's not their choice 'because of the cost.'

'Is there an appetite to rescind the original motion?' asked Blair.

'I don't like the idea of a new council undoing what a previous council has done,' said Councillor Bob Ireland. 'I was at that previous council meeting (as a spectator in January 2013). It was the business case for the local resident that swayed the council at that time. I personally support this.'

Council voted to rescind the original motion and allow the improvement of the hydro line on the municipal road allowance.