

# Island <sup>Reprint</sup> Tides

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## BCUC rules VITR will be overhead

It's overhead wires—again—for the new electrical transmission line to Vancouver Island. The BC Utilities Commission (BCUC) approved the BC Transmission Corporation's (BCTC) application for the Vancouver Island Transmission Reinforcement (VITR) project. The proposal is to replace the forty-year-old high-voltage DC lines, which run through Tsawwassen and across Galiano, Parker, and Salt Spring Islands, with a new overhead AC line by October 2008. The new line will provide power generated on the BC mainland to Vancouver Island.

The Commission ruled that there was a need for a new line, and that alternatives put forward by Sea Breeze Power Corporation and others would be more expensive than BCTC's proposal. It rejected arguments that overhead lines were a health hazard to those who lived nearby, and that the existence of the line reduced the value of nearby property.

BCUC's decision clearly identified cost-effectiveness (i.e. minimum cost) as the most important factor in determining the public interest. The Revised Hearing Issues List included several questions related to the relative socioeconomic impacts of the alternatives, including safety, reliability, health, aesthetic, recreation, habitat, First Nations and construction impacts.

There are, said the Commission, no routes without adverse impacts on someone. This was particularly relevant when it came to considering alternative routes through South Delta, where residents organized as TRAHVOL (Tsawwassen Residents Against High Voltage Overhead Lines) both objected to the proposed routing and requested that the lines be placed underground. Much the same considerations motivated the Salt Spring Island-based IRAHVOL (Island Residents etc. etc.)

### Alternatives

Among the options considered by the Commission were alternative routes through or around the Tsawwassen area, and the burying of portions of the line through Tsawwassen and across the Gulf Islands.

Other alternatives considered were a proposal by Sea Breeze, subsequently withdrawn, to run a 'HVDC Light' line underground and underwater from the mainland to Vancouver Island, and an alternative Sea Breeze proposal to run another 'HVDC Light' cable from Vancouver Island to Port Angeles on Washington's Olympic Peninsula (the Juan de Fuca project).

### Public Consultation

The lengthy BCUC hearings were accompanied by 'town hall' meetings both in Delta and on the Islands. The Commission strongly criticized BCTC for insensitivity to the concerns of residents along its proposed right-of-way, and for its consultation process.

The Commission Panel noted that the consultation activities of BCTC seemed to centre on its preferred route option, rather than a broad exploration of project alternatives with the public. The Panel accepted that a broad exploration of project alternatives may not have been appropriate with a very general audience (e.g., public open houses) but could have been useful at an early stage with a limited group of opinion leaders and key stakeholders such as the Corporation of Delta: 'The Commission Panel found no evidence of such consultations in the Application. Further, the Commission Panel considers that some of the issues explored in the hearing process could have been avoided had BCTC engaged key stakeholders in a more open discussion of project alternatives. In particular, the Commission Panel believes that some of the project alternatives identified during the hearing process could have been identified and evaluated by BCTC prior to the CPCN Application and hearing process.'

### Radiation from Power Lines

BCTC had produced numerous calculations of electromagnetic radiation from power lines, and these had been challenged by TRAHVOL and IRAHVOL witnesses. But in the end, BCUC rejected the argument that overhead power lines are a health hazard. 'The Commission has addressed the issue of health concerns from EMF exposure in several previous decisions and has concluded that the scientific evidence regarding EMF effects is inconclusive and does not support the theory that power line EMF is a health hazard. In view of the lingering uncertainty and until science is able to provide more definitive evidence, the Commission has previously concluded that a strategy of prudent avoidance and low cost attenuation where possible is appropriate, and has expressed an intention to keep itself apprised of EMF research.'

The Commission concluded: 'The Commission Panel accepts BCTC's calculations of the EMF profiles and finds that the EMF levels

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associated with the existing and proposed lines are well below the established exposure guidelines ... in the absence of convincing new evidence that indicates that change is warranted and/or imminent, the Commission Panel concludes that it should not impose lower EMF exposure standards on VITR ... the Commission Panel directs BCTC to file a public report with the Commission every two years, or sooner if there are major developments in the field, that summarizes the latest results of EMF risk assessments and any changes in guidelines developed by the World Health Organization, ICNIRP, Health Canada and others, where relevant.'

Interestingly, later in the report, BCUC states: 'The Commission Panel expects that if EMF and safety concerns had been supported by the evidence then those concerns would have been determinative. They were not.'

### **Property Values**

Because the VITR proposal does not involve the building of a transmission line on a new right-of-way, but the replacement of an existing line, the Commission concluded that it would not have a significant effect on property values. Effects, said the Commission, would be short term and could result from the controversy surrounding the construction of the replacement line.

### **Environmental and Aesthetic Considerations**

BCTC's argument on these points amounted to the observation that since there were already transmission lines in place along the existing right of way, the substitution of one line for another would make little difference in environmental or aesthetic impact. The Islands Trust argued that BCTC should consider alternatives that provided the opportunity to restore the natural beauty of the Islands, but BCTC argued that this would be an expensive 'luxury' and could not be afforded. The Commission agreed, saying that it thought the new transmission towers would be an aesthetic improvement on the old ones.

BCTC has still to obtain environmental permits for VITR.

### **Lowest Cost Wins**

In the end, BCUC concluded that new transmission capacity was needed to serve Vancouver Island and VITR would be the lowest cost alternative. No other considerations, or the Sea Breeze alternatives, would matter enough to overcome this cost advantage, and that public convenience would be best served by the alternative that would have the least effect on future electricity costs. ✍