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## **Salt Spring town hall meeting seeks power line alternatives**

A lively 'town hall' meeting on Salt Spring Island on Saturday, January 7, saw opponents of the construction of a new high voltage power line across the Island out in force. The meeting, held by the BC Utilities Commission (BCUC), is preliminary to upcoming public hearings on two alternative approaches to supplying additional power to Vancouver Island from the Mainland. Another similar meeting was held in Tsawwassen on January 14.

The Ganges meeting, held in the ArtSpring meeting and exhibit area, started promptly at 11am with the Raging Grannies and the Powerline Song. The place was 'full to overflowing' in the words of one participant. There were some 25 speakers, and the meeting was over by 4:35.

Three BCUC commissioners were there: Chairman Robert Hobbs, Commissioners Nadine Nicholls and Lisa O'Hara, along with some BCUC staff and officials from BC Transmission Corporation and Sea Breeze Converter Corp. They listened, took few notes, and asked no questions.

### **Alternative Proposals**

The BC Transmission Corporation (originally part of BC Hydro) has proposed the replacement of the existing DC power lines on the existing right of way with high-voltage AC power lines (this is known as the VITR project). The right of way runs across Galiano, Parker, and Salt Spring Islands; fifty-year-old submarine cables cross the Strait of Georgia and Trincomali Channel, and high-level cables cross Montague Harbour and Sansum Narrows.

But as an alternative, Sea Breeze Power Corporation, a public company, has proposed that Vancouver Island's anticipated power needs be supplied by underwater and underground 'HVDC Light' power cables (this is termed the VIC project) directly to the Victoria area; or from the Olympic Peninsula in the State of Washington to Victoria (across the Strait of Juan de Fuca); or both.

The BC Utilities Commission, which must grant a 'Certificate of Public Convenience and Necessity' (CPCN) before either new crossing of Georgia Strait may be built, has decided to combine the hearings and public consultation process for both.

Seabreeze's proposal for the Juan de Fuca Cable project will also require a CPCN from the National Energy Board, since it crosses the international boundary.

### **Opposition to Salt Spring Power Lines**

The existing power lines occupy a right of way through a number of rural valleys, across the north side of Ganges Village, close to

the hospital, seniors' housing, and many houses, and across Mount Erskine over parkland. To quote the IRAHVOL (Island Residents Against High Voltage Overhead Lines) presentation, 'a more picturesque route could not have been chosen'.

At the January 7 meeting, IRAHVOL represented the leading edge of the opposition to building new power lines on the existing right of way. Their objective was to persuade BCUC to approve a completely subsea route which would avoid the Islands altogether, and use 'HVDC Light' technology. The existing transmission towers, they proposed, could be taken down and the right of way easements cancelled. Their chairperson, Enid Turner, received a noisy standing ovation at the conclusion of her presentation.

When the original overhead power line was built, some fifty years ago, the Gulf Islands were largely unpopulated, and Salt Spring had only a tenth of its present population. Now, the Gulf Islands are one of Canada's most important recreational and residential areas, and the centre of our newest National Park.

Speakers at the meeting made the point that constructing a new overhead power line across the Islands was no longer acceptable, particularly bearing in mind that it would be there for another fifty years. Specific clauses in the Salt Spring Official Community Plan oppose any expansion of the power line.

BCTC's VITR project, they charged, was conceived ten years ago, when 'HVDC Light' technology was not yet available. This new technology, which permits high capacity power lines to be laid on the sea bottom and buried in narrow trenches on land, drastically reduces the 'ecological footprint' of power transmission, and makes wide clear cut powerline slashes unnecessary. Speaker after speaker at the Ganges meeting accused BCTC of being unwilling to consider this alternative. In fact, BCTC had stated that a significant advantage of building a new power line with more and taller towers was the ability to use the existing right-of-way.

### **Electromagnetic Radiation (EMF) and Other Concerns**

Overhead power lines produce electromagnetic radiation, which increases with the strength of the current transmitted and with proximity to the line. There is evidence to suggest that this may contribute to an increased incidence of cancers among people who live close by, and this is the major concern of power line opponents. The IRAHVOL paper pointed out that a recent proposal to place a cellphone antenna on top of the Ganges Fire Hall had been defeated because of concerns about EMF.

On the other hand, DC lines buried in pairs result in forces that cancel each other out, minimizing this hazard.

Other concerns voiced at the meeting focussed on reduced property values; in fact, some property owners claimed that since BCTC makes money from the power transmission, they should pay rent for their easement.

### **Are They Listening?**

Since the commissioners initiated no discussion, some participants got the idea that BCUC had already made up its mind. This impression of bias was similar to what had happened at the GSX hearings some months earlier. One speaker accused BCUC of conducting a 'pretend' public consultation.

BCUC's mandate is to consider the economics and technical feasibility of proposals. The environmental and socio-economic impacts of proposals are considered by the provincial Ministry of the Environment in their review process. Therefore some of the arguments advanced by the speakers at the Salt Spring meeting may not have concerned the BCUC Commissioners.

It is expected that while the BCUC will carry out a comparison of the Seabreeze and BCTC proposals, the environmental review process will only consider the 'winner' of the BCUC review. Therefore, there will be no comparison of the environmental and socio-economic impacts of the two proposals.

This flaw in the review process was apparent in the consideration and hearings of the Duke Point gas fired generation proposal, and also the National Energy Board hearings on the GSX gas pipeline.

### **Comparative Economics**

However, there is still lots for BCUC to chew on. Seabreeze's proposal, which not only suggests an alternative for power transmission from the Mainland to Vancouver Island but also a possible underwater line to the Olympic Peninsula, in fact raises

questions (again) about BC Hydro's entire power supply strategy for Vancouver Island. Seabreeze claims that, in BCTC's costing of the proposed high-voltage powerline across the Gulf Islands, BCTC has not considered either maintenance and operating costs over the life of the new line, but also has not considered the costs of upgrades needed to lines on Vancouver Island because the new power arrives on the Island well to the north of Victoria, where it is most needed.

If these costs are considered, says Seabreeze, the VITR proposal is more expensive than the VIC proposal, which feeds the new power directly to the Victoria area. BCTC, meanwhile, claims a substantial cost advantage for its proposal, by using the existing right of way. The actual costs should come out in the BCUC hearings.

### **Comment**

Once again, flaws in both planning and regulatory review are resulting from BC Hydro's planning and presentation of projects one at a time, without an overall strategic context.

The Ganges 'town hall' meeting made clear the value of public input into the consideration of these new energy projects.

While many of the presentations focused on the impact of high-voltage power lines on the Island, the public has useful and constructive thought to contribute on the wider questions of economics and engineering strategy. This was illustrated at the GSX hearings and the Duke Point hearings, and will be illustrated again at the upcoming hearings on these Vancouver Island power supply alternatives.

BCUC has taken a useful step in this case by establishing a comparative process, but serious restructuring of both the proposal and regulatory processes is still needed to achieve decisions that best serve not only the companies but also the people of the province. ✍

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