

February 23, 2005

Mayor & Councillors
City of Peterborough
500 George Street North
Peterborough, Ontario
K9H 3R9

Dear Mayor & Councillors

There has been a great deal of controversy with respect to the DNA Cluster Project at Trent University on a number of grounds. Our opposition centers on the questionable economic viability of this project given its reliance on continued funding through the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources for rabies programs.

Ontario already spends more money on rabies research, control and testing than any other jurisdiction in North America. This is not sustainable given the fact that it is the lowest risk disease on the continent and should not be a public policy priority given major health, education, social service and city infrastructure needs that are going unfunded.

The spokesperson for the DNA Cluster Project has stated that the project “transcends rabies, rabies is just a small part of the big picture”. The attached outline and supporting documents challenge this statement. Rabies is indeed the main cash cow that, as stated above, is simply not sustainable.

The \$2M being requested of Peterborough taxpayers offers no assurance that it is a prudent investment on the part of the City because there is no business plan to assess. It is inappropriate for the proponents of the project to expect that confidentiality rights that apply to private deals be expected to be paid for with public funds. Funding should be withheld until full information is made available to Council.

We would be pleased to provide more information to Council on the documents that are attached and the questions that they raise.

Sincerely

Donna DuBreuil
President

Attachment

What is at the Core of the DNA Cluster Project:

Denis Ferkany states in the Examiner (Feb. 11/05) that the DNA Cluster Project “*transcends rabies, rabies is just a small part of the big picture*”.

Without a Business Plan (which Trent is unwilling to provide the City) it is hard to validate this statement. However, there are sources of information that confirm that rabies is indeed the main cash cow. More concerning is the fact that this information is being intentionally withheld by Trent:

There are two versions of the Canada Foundation for Innovation proposal. Why are there two versions? Why has the one provided by Brad White a different date on it and why have sections been removed from this version?

Canada Foundation for Innovation – Proposal dated May 28, 2003. This was received from CFI through Access to Information by the Ottawa-Carleton Wildlife Centre. It was requested in April 2004 and received in July 2004. **It is clearly the only official version**. It has considerably more information that has been omitted in the copy provided by Brad White.

Canada Foundation for Innovation – Proposal dated October 3, 2003. This was provided by Brad White to a Trent University faculty member on October 14, 2004 (memo attached). Eight pages of the official CFI version are missing in this document. The missing sections focus on the wildlife disease elements of the project and include many references to rabies. Samples of these sections are attached. Note the reference to the Biocontainment facilities that will replace the reliance on the off site facilities such as the Canadian Food Inspection Agency in Nepean to work on “live” viruses such as rabies.

Also missing in the version provided by Brad White are 15 pages of financial information that include the budget, a funding breakdown from eligible partners, an operating budget (it indicates that the financial structure for operating the project will be based on the model established for the Forensic Science Centre over the past two years which is operated as a Joint Partnership between the MNR and Trent), and the management plan for the infrastructure.

Note: The most compelling argument that rabies funding is key to the viability of the DNA Cluster project is that this is the only significant funding that has flowed to date. While other wildlife diseases or research such as chronic wasting disease, West Nile, wolves and bears are mentioned, there are no significant funds available or likely for these issues. Further:

- The MNR Rabies Research & Development Unit is housed on the Trent campus. The principal researchers that are included in the CFI application are Brad White and Rick Rosatte. In the promotional material for the DNA Cluster project, Brad White who is identified as “*the spark behind the initiative*” states that he “*deliberately moved his laboratory from McMaster University to Trent because the OMNR relocated its headquarters to Peterborough*”.

- Brad White received a four-year \$815,000 grant from the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council in 2002 for a project “*to assess the mechanisms leading to the spread of raccoon rabies*”. The project was instrumental in the subsequent applications to the CFI and the matching funds that are automatically generated by CFI awards from the Ontario government through the Ontario Innovation Trust and the Ministry of Economic Development and Trade.

This NSERC project has been challenged as one that “*may be an interesting genetics topic for curiosity-driven researchers, but from a public policy perspective, it is a waste of taxpayer dollars*”, i.e. effective rabies control tools are already available so how much more effective will it be to know the genetics of a sample of the host population, particularly given that rabies is not a risk in North America given pet vaccinations.

- Rick Rosatte is shown on the application as a senior scientist with the MNR with extensive research experience on raccoons and rabies. The application states “*he will use the automated DNA profiling and banking infrastructure and the biocontainment facilities as well as the animal tracking infrastructure*”.
- The only example given in the DNA Cluster promotional material with respect to “*commercialization potential*” is rabies. And, it is disingenuous in that it refers to rabies being a worldwide problem, knowing full well that where rabies remains a problem in developing countries it is mostly ignored given the many other more serious health problems that remain unaddressed. Where there is the rare attempt to reduce human cases, as in Latin America, it is done by introducing a control and/or vaccination program for dogs, not spending millions of dollars dropping aerial baits for wildlife.

Aside from the questions raised about the different versions of the CFI proposal, there are questions that have to do with the “selling” of this project as a cluster when, in fact, it meets none of the criteria established for successful cluster development, i.e. “*clusters are not a panacea, that risks are high and governments should not attempt to build them from scratch using public monies, that clusters cannot be forced and that they require a critical mass of, on average, 20 private businesses that are already established to be successful*”.

Where are the private sector partners the DNA Cluster is going to attract to Peterborough? If there was a commercial potential, there would already be companies aboard. The understanding that Maxxam Analytics, for example, was to move its Guelph Laboratory to Peterborough turns out not to be the case.

Information, in the form of a Business Plan, is essential before committing more public funds to this project.