

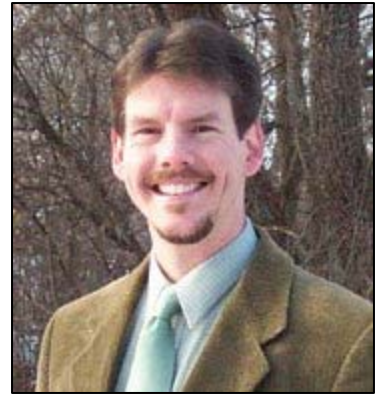
Green ideas

Brent Wood's commentary on politics and policy appears every Monday, Wednesday and Friday from mid-August until after the October 10 provincial election.

Saturday, September 1, 2007

Trent Rapids: "Greenwashing" the abuse of public funds

This week I took a break from the office and spent some time swimming and camping at Sandbanks provincial park in Prince Edward County.



The water was warm and the beach was beautiful. The area is a natural paradise in the summer with high dunes and shallow waters.

Yet the dunes at Outlet Beach were home not only to rare and hardy plant species, but also to pop cans, water bottles, styrofoam cups and even disposable diapers. And this is in spite of the fact that there were garbage cans and blue bins only 30 feet away.

It's one of the great - and perhaps tragic - ironies that humanity's Achilles heel may not be warfare, racism or sexism, but simple carelessness and the short-sightedness that breeds it.

The Trent Rapids hydroelectric project, planned for the Otonabee River just north of Trent University, is a shining example of the repercussions of short-sighted policy-making and short-sighted overconsumption of natural resources by the public.

It's also a prime example of the shady, unaccountable world of public-private partnerships.

The west bank of the Otonabee north of Trent may not be a tourist paradise like Sandbanks, but it's a lovely spot nonetheless, and has provided countless hours of recreation and enjoyment of natural beauty for thousands of Peterborough residents over the years.

Yet a public-private partnership called the Trent Rapids Power Corporation plans to bulldoze the area, blast out a canal over one kilometer in length in this natural area between Locks 22 and 23 of the Trent Severn Waterway and erect a series of turbines, hoping to produce 8 megawatts of hydroelectricity.

The project directly contradicts the City's Official Plan as well as Trent's Nature Areas stewardship plan, and has been subject to Ontario Municipal Board hearings this summer. And contrary to what we are often led to believe of "public-private partnerships," the money is all coming from the public purse, and the profits all flowing to the private partners.

At this surface level, the debate appears to be a simple cliché - nature lovers pitted against engineers over whether a natural area should be left alone or bulldozed in favour of a machine to produce more electricity for our electronic toys.

But the politics behind this project are incredibly messy, exemplifying the worst kinds of unaccountable behind-the-scenes decision-making. The Harris PC government, Trent University administration, the City of Peterborough and the Peterborough Utilities Commission and the Shaman Power Corporation are all culpable in a unethical con game in which taxpayers are being obliged to pay for something they don't want and don't need.

Proponents of the project are driven by a singular belief that Ontario is "running out" of electricity and we are desperately in need of more energy-generating capacity.

The reality is that Ontario's electricity generating capacity is greater than virtually every other jurisdiction in the world. We have been told countless times by scientists the world over that we must reduce our energy consumption by at least 50% if we are to have any chance of surviving the 21st century. Yet Ontarians, among the wealthiest people in the world, continue to subsidize global warming by refusing to pay the real cost of the energy we use and carelessly racking up the kilowatts on our electrical meters.

In my previous posts I addressed the problem of overconsumption with respect to reliance on nuclear energy and the environmental and social costs that it incurs. At first glance, most of us would think that replacing nuclear energy with hydroelectricity, a renewable resource, would be a self-evident good. And this is where the "greenwashing" starts.

The Ontario Liberal government, taking a page from the Green Party policy book, has offered to buy "green" electricity from small suppliers at the rate of 11 cents per kilowatt hour - double what consumers are paying for it. The project has been highly successful in prompting innovative wind, solar and hydro projects across the province.

The problem, however, is precisely that as consumers we aren't paying the real price of the electricity we use. The Liberals have adopted only half of the green formula - the subsidy half. Afraid to raise electricity rates to their real market levels, the Liberals have created an absurd situation, as Ontario taxpayers are being obliged to pay the real cost anyway through our taxes, but without any connection between what we consume and what we pay.

The Trent Rapids Power Corporation is jointly owned by Shaman Development Corporation, a small private firm based in Toronto, and Peterborough Utilities Inc., the publicly-owned local utility. Representatives from Shaman have admitted that the project would not be profitable or even feasible without the publicly subsidized rate of 11 cents per kilowatt hour.

In other words, all of the profit that Shaman will earn from selling the electricity from the project will come directly from your tax bill. And you don't even get a say in whether or not you want the project to happen.

The project was recently the subject of Ontario Municipal Board hearings, as several astute Peterborough residents, alarmed at the flagrant violation of due process at City Hall and Trent's disregard for its own Nature Areas policy, made legal appeals to the OMB.

Peterborough's Official Plan designates the land in question as "major open space and natural area," allowing only specific, small-scale utility developments such as electrical substations for surrounding neighbourhoods. Any significant alteration to this designation would require a change in the Official Plan, which would have to go through City Council and extensive public meetings.

Trent Rapids, however, merely had to go to the City's Committee of Adjustment, which gave the project the go-ahead in spite of its flagrant violation of the Official Plan.

Yes, a multi-million dollar project which will radically transform the Otonabee River where it enters the City limits didn't even make it to City Council for review.

Next week I'll get into the specifics of the sordid tale behind this unaccountable use of public funds, beginning with the Harris PC government's policy of starving Trent University for funds in the 1990s, and continuing right up through the recent OMB hearings on the Trent Rapids project.