

AUC officials met with raucous welcome



Ian Kucerak

Keith Gladwyn, lead application officer with the AUC, points out where the routes for the Heartland Transmission Project could go during a public meeting in Morinville Monday night.

October 26, 2010

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Morinville's St. Jean Baptiste Hall was the site of a loud one-sided debate on Monday night.

Opponents of the Heartland Transmission Project, including many landowners on the alternate route that could run past Morinville, voiced their opposition during a meeting meant to assist them in preparing for Alberta Utilities Commission (AUC) hearings set for next April.

Spokesperson Jim Law said the meeting was held to let interveners learn about the process and requirements necessary to be involved in the project approval hearings. Regardless of how many questions on the need for the project as a whole, which the government has enshrined in law by passing Bill 50 in 2009, he felt many people got what they needed from the meeting.

"There is a process available to express [their] concerns, and to make sure that they're heard, they're understood and that they're within our mandate to be considered," Law said Tuesday morning. "One of the issues last night was that a number of people wanted to discuss issues that are outside the scope of our mandate or jurisdiction, specifically the needs aspect of the project."

Approximately 130 people came out to air their grievances and get information on the power line project. The AUC is using an enhanced participation process that gives automatic standing to anyone living within 800 metres of either of the proposed lines,

Law explained. It gives those wishing to present to the AUC more options, such as sending in a letter or scheduling a face-to-face meeting.

Under the 2009 Electric Statutes Amendment Act (Bill 50), the AUC cannot determine whether or not the transmission lines in question need to be built, but they do make the decision on which of Altalink's and Epcor's transmission routes is chosen, how their routes could be modified or if they are denied, AUC legal counsel J.P. Mousseau told the crowd.

Law said that the needs assessment was made by the government, and that the Commission has enhanced the process by which interveners can have their say.

"In the end, it was a political decision to proceed with legislation that identified four projects as critical infrastructure and exempted the [AUC] from any ability to consider need as part of the process," Law said.

Colleen Boddez, with the Sturgeon Blue Line Group, says the process is flawed, as politicians were the ones making a call to build more transmission infrastructure, rather than experts with the AUC. She argues that users, both residential and industrial, won't need the increased power capacity delivered by the power lines, and they won't like seeing their electricity bills increase to pay for upgrades either.

"I don't know how many people I know that can afford to have their power bill increase to three or four times. I know I can't afford it ... for us, I pay close to \$700 per month," said Boddez, a sculptor and construction company owner. "How can that go up three or four times? Forget it — I'll be out of business."

Tam Andersen owns Prairie Gardens and Adventure Farm, north of Bon Accord. Along with a corn maze, the farm hosts tours for 50,000 people each season, including 8,000 children. The proposed alternate line would run right past her farm, over the corn maze's admissions booth, she said.

Andersen said she worries about the effectiveness of using wireless Internet, processing debit card payments or using global positioning system receivers used to design the living maze.

"Our brand is wholesome, family fun in the pristine countryside and our farm will be converted overnight to industrial wasteland, essentially," she said.

The Andersens heard about the proposal when it was announced in January 2010, and have been frustrated with it ever since.

"I don't think that the public understands that [the Heartland Transmission Project] impacts everybody. It's not just our farm ... every single Albertan is going to bear the costs of these decisions," Anderson said.

She came to the Monday meeting to voice her concerns and to ask AUC representatives about how to maintain confidentiality, to protect her business's information, when she gives her testimony next April.

While Boddez and Andersen will participate in the AUC hearing process surrounding the Heartland Transmission Project, they feel the only avenue they have to stop a project that they feel is grossly expensive and unnecessary is through the ballot box by changing the government.

"It has so many far-reaching implications and the arguments against this transmission facility, this transmission project, are so compelling that it just seems impossible to think that our government, in this day and age, wouldn't wake up to this fact," Boddez said. "This is just a terrible thing against the Alberta people."

The AUC held a similar information meeting to that held in Edmonton on Tuesday. A process meeting has also been setup for potential interveners and the applicants on Nov. 2 at 9 a.m. at the Edmonton Expo Centre. The members of Sturgeon Blue Line Group are planning a second information session of their own, next week at St. Jean Baptiste Hall, in Morinville, on Thursday, Nov. 4, at 7 p.m.