

Town fires back against AltaLink plan

Town and residents fear adverse impacts on town's social, health and financial future

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The town has formally filed an objection to the Alberta Utilities Commission (AUC) on AltaLink's plan to build a new electrical power infrastructure through the southern edge of the community -- charging it will have negative economic and social impacts on the community.

The town's objection to AltaLink's preferred route adds to growing community and area concerns over the electrical provider's proposed \$200-million redevelopment of the Red Deer transmission grid, a project that could see the construction of several substations with new power lines in the Ponoka, Innisfail and Didsbury areas.

"My neighbours and I are against it. There are about 10 of them and they have families. I have two small children," said Kim Thompson, who lives 10 kilometres east of town and is objecting to AltaLink's plan to build a transfer station 800 metres from her six-acre property. "They never contacted me even though I am the closest to the substation they are putting in. I know they have an alternate route that isn't around people's houses but I have heard that the man who wanted to sell them the land wanted more for it and the lady on this side where the preferred is would sell them the 20 acres cheaper.

"We have lists from McGill University of the adverse health effects to the people who live in the radius of this 20-acre substation," she said, adding there are serious environmental concerns over the potential effects from exposure to electromagnetic fields. "In the past all I worried was my neighbour's cow poop. But now if I have all this stuff built there over 20 acres then what is going to drain onto my land? Is it going to affect my well? Environmentally, this is farm land; there is canola seed growing there."

However, Peter Brodsky, manager of external communications for AltaLink, said his company, Alberta's largest regulated electricity transmission company, is aware of the objections that have come from the Town of Innisfail and area residents over its preferred route. He said the company has addressed them a "number of times.

"We did design the preferred route after consulting with the town as well as individuals in the area and we also did look at the area structure plan for the area and we still feel this is the preferred route," said Brodsky. "It provides the lowest

impact on a number of factors, including environment and developable land. We are aware the Town of Innisfail has concerns about that route but we stand by our decision to submit that as a preferred route.”

Thompson and other area residents attended an AUC information session in Red Deer last week. Citizens and other interested groups have until Nov. 18 to file submissions to the AUC, which will then determine if there are any unresolved claims to move to a public inquiry.

Craig Teal, the town’s director of planning and operations, told town council on Nov. 12 that AltaLink’s preferred route will seriously hamper economic development in the town’s already challenged industrial areas.

“We spent a lot of time as a community in our industrial park putting down overhead power lines so we didn’t create an overhead hazard for the shipping of large industrial items, such as pressure vessels coming out of Bilton or the oil rigs that used to come out of the X-Treme yard,” said Teal. “We would be less than impressed if all of a sudden for energy transmission we are now introducing a new constraint so that materials can’t easily come and go into our industrial parks off the provincial highway system.”

Teal said AltaLink’s preferred route would also cut through a future planned residential area on the west side of Highway 54.

“Not the prettiest neighbour,” said Teal, adding the electrical provider’s plans also call for the power lines to take up right of way land 20 metres wide that the town will have no future use for. “We may be able to put a trail underneath it, which is more land than they need for a trail. Not the most pleasant trail experience.

“We will be able to cross under it with road and water lines and sewer but we won’t be able to build any park, put in any housing, or use it for an industrial yard,” he added. “It almost becomes a bit of a dead space, and unfortunately in those circumstances during the development process developers try to hand over those kind of dead spaces to the towns as part of their park dedication, which means we are left holding the bag maintaining that to benefit AltaLink.”

Jim Law, spokesperson for Alberta Utilities Commission, said it is not uncommon for municipalities to file objections in the process.

“The question is whether the impact the commission is considering is directly or negatively affected,” said Law, adding the commission takes all objections to planned electrical provider projects seriously. “Right after the November 18 (deadline) the commission would look at the town’s, as well as everyone else’s submissions, and if there are any unresolved concerns this would likely trigger a public hearing.”

Law said an AUC hearing would look at all social, economic and environmental issues that may be of concern to the community. He said the commission panel has three options to consider when deciding on an application – acceptance, denying it or even accepting the application but with conditions.

Law said the commission has decided in the past to rule for an alternate route.

However, Teal said the alternate route proposed by AltaLink also raises concerns for the town.

“They could come up with a perfectly good third solution that resolves all of our issues,” said Teal.