

LLG opposes new line project



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A local group of landowners are opposed to a new transmission project that would see power lines running west from Pincher Station to connect to a trunk line on the Livingstone Range.

The Alberta Electric Systems Operator ordered transmission company AltaLink to plan and develop the \$500 million to \$750 million Castle Ridge Rock to Chapel Rock project this fall.

After the developer held their first round of public consultations the other week the Livingstone Landowners Group met to discuss their position on Nov. 8.

"They're beginning what they call their consultation phase, which is to throw out a bunch of ideas and see how people react and see if there is an easy way through this or not," vice-president of LLG, Bill Trafford said.

By the sounds of the discussion at the meeting, the LLG is ramping up the opposition rhetoric. Throughout the evening at the Lundbreck Community Hall - where about 50 people attended - combative vocabulary like "fight", "battle" and "resistance" was tossed about.

The group came up with five positions on the CRRCR project. They do not support or endorse it or want to discuss specific routes with AltaLink. They want the line company to use existing infrastructure corridors where possible and avoid environmentally significant areas such as native grassland. They want the lines located and designed in ways that limit visual intrusions - preferably underground - and they want AltaLink to recognize and act in accordance with the recently-released South Saskatchewan Regional Plan.

This is not the first time that the LLG has opposed a transmission project. They also objected to the Fidler to Chapel Rock project, which was recently cancelled after the Alberta Utilities Commission found a lack of need, that would have seen lines running north of the Oldman Dam and over to the same 1201 trunk line.

"We undertook to work with them and deal with that and effectively the decision that came out was don't run that line north of the Oldman Dam, run it south of the Oldman Dam to Castle Rock substation," Trafford said at the meeting.

The new CRRCR proposals show possible line routes starting at a substation south of the dam and then heading north again after passing Cowley.

Both the LLG and AltaLink have stated that they are looking for feedback from the people affected by the possible power routes. However, the landowner group claimed that the transmission company may use questionable procedures during their proposal consultations.

"They'll do the very best to break you apart," LLG director Bruce Mowat said during the meeting. "They'll try and get you fighting with your neighbour and don't do that. Just staying working as a group. You have a lot of power in numbers working together and we found that out in the past."

"It's tactics, they have lots of different tactics to approach it," he said. "And they'll have one (consultant) come talk to you one day and you think you'll be dealing with that fella' and the next week it's somebody else and then the next week after that it's somebody else."

AltaLink's external communications manager Peter Brodsky would not comment directly on these allegations because he was not at the meeting but he did offer a statement about the company's consultation process.

"What I will say is when we choose routes and do our public consultation we do it at the highest level of integrity and ethics," Brodsky explained. "We deal with our stakeholders on a level of honesty and integrity that we're quite proud of and we will speak to any and all landowners impacted by our projects, hear their concerns and do our best to accommodate them where practical and possible."

Brodsky also addressed the continuity of AltaLink's consultations, saying, "Because we want to develop relationships with our landowners, our stakeholders, we assign agents and those agents would continue the process through the full submission of the project."

However, if a landowner requested another agent due to any concerns, "We endeavour to keep very detailed record of all our consultations and so the ability to move from one consultation agent to another shouldn't require a complete relearning of the relationship."

While a number of people at the LLG meeting said they considered AltaLink's public consultations to be more like "risk management" sessions it was clear that they considered the routing as only one piece of the power puzzle.

"We have people all over Alberta fighting for the same values," David McIntyre, a forestry scientist, said. "We have not done a good job in getting our government to fight for us. Jim Prentice has said he is fighting for the environment, what is he going to do in this particular case?"

McIntyre also mentioned some of his recent public correspondence with MLA Pat Stier and the role of local council in this issues.

"It's that our own council doesn't stand up for us," he said. "And I don't want to say they don't but I haven't heard their voices standing up for us on this."

Both Reeve Brian Hammond and Deputy Reeve Terry Yagos were at the LLG meeting and were thanked for their presence. Later in the evening a question was put directly to the reeve about the MD's ability to influence the situation, especially regarding the community values document.

"You can point the finger at the municipality all you want but that's not where the decisions are made," said Hammond.

"We're not your enemies...the only thing we can do is make them aware of the concerns of the ratepayers that are brought to our attention," he said.

Hammond went on to say that the MD, along with passing on messages to higher levels of government, is also reviewing people's position on wind farm development in the area.

"We need to make some hard decisions... The intensity of the resistance, the participation of the public, needs to be directed at the people who have the right and the ability to make decisions. The regulator, the Alberta Electric Systems Operator, they're the people making the large-scale decisions," Hammond said. One local landowner, Justin Thompson, also highlighted the fact that transmissions decisions come from the province and the populace.

"One of the things I think is really important to remember in this instance is it's not AltaLink's choice of whether this line is going to cost X or Y or Z," he said. "It's the regulator's choice and ultimately Albertans choice. So right now they'll come out with the status quo, which is the big lattice towers. And it's up to communities and others to say, 'We want to understand the true cost of different options.'"

"At the end of the day taxpayers, Albertans, might decide that this landscape is valuable enough to enough to spend an extra \$10 million," Thompson said. "It's not AltaLink's choice. But (their) first step in this is to say, 'We're going to do big, ugly lattice towers, 'and that's the choice because it costs too much to do anything else."

Some of the different options LLG would prefer include running power lines underground or along Highway 3. In the consultations in Pincher Creek last month, AltaLink representatives said that underground lines are much more expensive than above-ground lines and that a route along Highway 3 could be problematic in terms of cost as well.

Discussion also turned to the fact that Albertans want cheap and reliable electricity and that people who do not live in the area do not care if power lines are installed.

"The notion that we need to make decisions on the basis of the interests of all Albertans, well there's some validity to that story," said Hammond. "And the other side of that is maybe if we're making decisions based on the interest of all Albertans and it impacts a very small microcosm of the total population, maybe there needs to be a recognition by all of Albertans."

According to Thompson, the value of this area extends beyond the relatively smaller number of people who live here.

"The point where this landscape is only valuable to 100 people, that's not true," he said. "There's hundreds of thousands of people who drive down the Highway 3 corridor every year. They love this landscape."

The meeting ended with LLG hoping to bolster their numbers and learn more about different engineering approaches to transmission development, especially regarding underground lines.

"We've have a really good team of people, very knowledgeable, very experienced... Well-regarded, well-respected and we have the attention of the AUC, AESO and AltaLink from the last go around so they know it's a force to be reckoned with not something they can slough off to the side," said Trafford.

Meanwhile Brodsky encouraged anyone that "If there are concerns I would hope they would bring those concerns directly to us so we can address them."

The next round of public consultations on the CRRCR transmission project is expected to take place in the winter or spring of 2015.