

FRONT PORCH PERSPECTIVE: Energy Planning issues will heat up again in York Region

By **Stephen Somerville**

The issue of high electricity prices in Ontario has continually been in the media spotlight over the past few years. Ironically, there has not been much press coverage of local electricity issues, mostly due to the fact that Ontario is currently enjoying a rather healthy supply margin.

But local electricity planning issues will slowly bring electricity back into the public spotlight in York Region and Aurora.

Some background:

In 2004, many citizens of Aurora were furious about the possibility of upgrading the existing 115 kV transmission line to a 230 kV high voltage line that runs through town from Markham to Newmarket. The redevelopment would have meant taller towers with wider bases, with the end result being that the towers and transmission lines would have been closer to homes.

Many ratepayer associations, led by the Aurora chapter of Stop Transmission Lines Over People (STOP), as well as by local Council, were against this project and wanted the Ontario Power Authority (OPA) (now called the Independent Electricity System Operator or IESO) to fully investigate all the alternatives.

Residents were concerned, from a health and safety perspective, about the link between electric and magnetic fields (EMF's) to childhood leukemia, and they were also worried about the value of their homes.

In the end, the transmission line was not upgraded. The Ontario Energy Board (OEB) decision instructed that a transformer station, to reduce the high level voltage to a more manageable level, be constructed. The Holland Junction Transmission station in King Township was built.

However, by 2008 Northern York Region was continuing growing beyond the level at which the existing infrastructure could meet the standards for reliability. If the main 230 kV transmission line became disrupted, the load at the Armitage Transformer Station in Newmarket, which is greater than 250 MW, could not be restored so as to comply with the IESO's reliability criteria.

Restoration therefore could only be achieved in the required time-frame by either local peaking generation that can turn on and quickly ramp up to 350 MW, or a new 230 kV transmission line from Markham to bring in the electricity from elsewhere in the province.

In the end, the Northern York Region Working Group collectively identified the construction of a peaking plant as the preferred solution over enhanced transmission and an approximately 370 MW natural gas fired peaking (simple-cycle) generation was built in King in 2012.

Aurora had again sidestepped the political mine field of either having large scale generation built within its borders or a new transmission line running through town.

Fast forward to 2015 and the IESO was developing a twenty year plan to look at ways of ensuring a reliable supply of electricity for York Region.

According to an advertisement that appeared in another local paper at the time:

?An Integrated Regional Resource Plan is being further developed by the three electric utilities serving the region ? Newmarket-Tay Power Distribution Ltd., PowerStream Inc. and Hydro One Networks Inc. ? in conjunction with the IESO.

?A Local Advisory Committee is being established to provide advice on the development of the plan's longer-term options, including innovative solutions that will address the region's electricity needs. They will also advise on how to best engage the broader community in the discussion.

The Local Advisory Committee ?comprises up to eighteen members, representing municipalities, First Nation and Metis communities, consumers and citizens, the business community, and environmental and conservation groups.?

As everyone knows, York Region is one of the fastest growing regions in Canada, and along with this growth comes an appetite for power. The overriding issue is that we do in fact need new sources of power in York region (at some point in time) to maintain our standard of living and way of life.

Communities cannot and should not grow unless energy needs are part of the equation. Just as we would not allow homes to be built without adequate provisions for water, sewage, schools and roads, nor should we allow development without a real plan for our power needs.

There is also the critical issue of balancing larger community interests vs. local interests ? that is the provincial government mandate of ensuring that the lights stay on vs. local governments' right to say no to a particular power project. It is a delicate balancing act.

In my next column, I will explore the priorities arising from the Local Advisory Committee Meetings as well as a high-level overview of potential options to address the longer-term needs in Northern York Region.

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