

OIL AND GAS

top

888632

→ Telkwa
Coal**Smithers Interior News, Page 0008, 23-Nov-2006****Smithers demands tougher coalbed methane rules**

By Thom Barker

Despite the closure of the tenure referral process for Telkwa coalbed methane, Citizens Concerned about Coalbed Methane are not letting up in their fight to keep the project from moving forward.

Last Tuesday, Greg Brown and Merran Smith, CCCBM spokespeople, made a presentation to Smithers council and garnered some support when council voted unanimously to send letters to members of the B.C. cabinet to ensure the Town's concerns are represented not only in the referral deliberations but in the final decision-making process.

Smithers' official response to the tenure referral included demands for a detailed aquifer assessment and fisheries impact study prior to the project's exploration phase and a traffic impact study prior to the production phase that will include financial assistance for additional road maintenance.

The letter, prepared by Mark Allen, director of development services, also addressed quality of life issues requesting assurances that the community forest project, recreational opportunities and airshed quality would not be affected by the development.

Brown and Smith's presentation summarized the CCCBM's activities and findings including results of a survey of more than 1,400 people, 97 per cent of whom were opposed to the project. The group also canvassed 32 of 38 households within the tenure area and found 31 to be in opposition.

A more scientific poll conducted by the Vancouver firm Synovate for the Northwest Institute of 300 random Bulkley Valley adults, concluded that support for the project stood at 21 per cent and opposition at 52 per cent with 27 per cent yet to form an opinion. It further concluded the support is soft with just 6 per cent strongly in favour while opposition is firm with 35 per cent strongly opposed.

Perhaps most significant in the Synovate poll was, for or against the project, 87 per cent of residents agreed the government should not sell development rights to Telkwa coalbed methane if the majority of the community feel the risks are too great and that almost 70 per cent agree the potential benefits are not worth the potential risk to wild salmon and steelhead.

The CCCBM tenure referral submission contained five main concerns:

Current regulations for produced water do not adequately protect the Bulkley Valley's groundwater, streams and rivers;

The community has not been given adequate information about the size and scope of the proposed project, nor a guarantee that future development will be limited to the proposed tenure area;

Serious, unresolved concerns exist regarding the ability of the B.C. Oil and Gas commission to adequately ensure compliance with B.C. regulations and protect the public interest.

2006-11-24

(PAB)

Experience elsewhere indicates that coalbed methane development will irreversibly alter the rural landscape of the Bulkley Valley and;

The benefits associated with coalbed methane are not worth the risk posed to other sectors of the existing local economy.

In supporting CCCBM's request to lobby cabinet, Mayor Jim Davidson specifically addressed the concerns about the ability of existing regulations and authorities to protect communities saying there is a need to look beyond the Bulkley Valley for the good of the province as a whole.

"It seems to me it is in the interest of all of us that our government takes a look at how that works," Davidson said.

"It's time to ask the government to look at the structure of the Oil and Gas Commission."

Brown commended the actions of council.

"I think their intent to write a letter to the cabinet ministers requesting a full social, economic and environmental assessment of this project before the tenure is granted is a really good step in the right direction," he said.

"I think it's a huge step for this council to start thinking outside of the Valley and start thinking about the province."

Copyright 2006 smithers

OIL AND GAS

top

Smithers Interior News, Page 0005, 23-Nov-2006

Smithers' field of dreams or nightmares?

By Thom Barker

If we build it, will they come?

Back in the day, when Smithers was but a fledgling agricultural community, the good people who built our town would never have considered putting the cart before the horse.

That is something our mayor, an old farmer himself, appreciates. Hence a fiscally conservative approach that has seen infrastructure and amenity projects like the airport runway extension and the second sheet of ice pushed back awaiting federal dollars that may or may not be forthcoming.

The argument for those projects is they will provide, combined with our natural amenities, opportunities for population growth and sustainable development.

Meanwhile, big box and coalbed methane dominate the town's psyche. The rallying cry of those opposed, among other epithets, is these kinds of development represent short term gain for long term pain. Big box = crappy jobs + death of unique character. Coalbed methane = not enough jobs + environmental degradation.

So, what are the alternatives?

Tourism keeps coming up. And rightfully so. As humans continue to encroach on the planet's last vestiges of wilderness, destinations like Smithers become more and more of an attraction.

High tech has been suggested. Great idea. It is an industry that can work anywhere and the people who work in it are the new granola, leading the sustainability charge.

What about education? Perhaps not traditionally thought of as an industry, education is big bucks. And one of the reasons Smithers' population is declining is because the young folks are going away to get educated and they are not coming back.

The list goes on, alternative energy, health care, the arts, value-added agricultural and wood products.

I'm no economist, but what I do know is it takes a buck to make a buck.

If we need to grow, which pretty much everyone agrees we do, it is going to take some investment, both in terms of time and money.

The question is, are we willing to take the short term pain for the long term gain?

Some months ago when I was researching an article on the Town's budget, I asked a number of accountants, city planners, economists and business people what an acceptable debt-equity ratio is. The answer: it depends on what you're trying to accomplish.

Perhaps it is time to put the cart before the horse and give some of the alternatives to big box and coalbed methane incentives to locate here. It may be a risk, but if ever there was a time to take a risk, it is now. Nationally and provincially the economy is on an upswing. In Northwest B.C., the coming of the container port at Prince Rupert and growing mining concerns represent opportunities Smithers cannot afford to miss out on.

If not the Town, if not Wal-Mart, if not Outrider Energy, who is going to invest in Smithers?

If we don't build it, will they still come?

Thom Barker is a reporter with The Interior News. To comment on this column, e-mail editor@interior-news.com

Copyright 2006 smithers