

Landowners Coalition continues fight

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Regional councillors heard arguments from seven members of the coalition while many more sat impassively watching from the gallery. The group is largely comprised of private landowners and businesses throughout the escarpment.

Each argued the NEC has mushroomed into an expensive bureaucracy, which they expect to be reduced if Halton staff assume development permit duties. However, they stressed that the Niagara Escarpment plan should remain in place to protect the natural features of the area, but would prefer its administration to be handled by regional and county governments.

"I'm here to tell you, there is no comparison between the unfair process at the NEC and the one you deal with on a daily basis," Herman Turkstra, solicitor for the coalition, said.

Glenn Schnarr, former chairman of the Credit Valley Conservation Authority, lent his support to the coalition, along with Halton Hills' Kent McClure, who successfully overturned a NEC rejection for his rural subdivision at the Ontario Municipal Board.

"We want decisions made by people who are politically accountable

to the people and who are knowledgeable about our region," McClure said. "We believe this will occur if the region takes over development control jurisdiction from the NEC."

The coalition was strongly opposed by Daphne Shropshall of the Hickory Falls Ratepayers Association and POWER's Barbara Halsall.

Both urged regional councillors not to assume controls yet, arguing they should instead wait until the NEC completes the five year review of its plan, expected later this month. Any changes resulting from the review may resolve some of the questions and problems the coalition has experienced with the NEC, they added.

"Our organization believes it is premature at best to consider the proposal of the landowners coalition," Shropshall said. "If there are inequities in the system, then fix the system, don't destroy it...Unravelling central control which is now in place will only allow localized political pressure, and localized interpretations of the plan, to influence future development. That is not in the public interest."

Halsall accused the coalition of a "hidden agenda," believing taking development control away from the

NEC is the group's first step in disbanding it altogether. She accused the coalition of being a front for developers who had trouble gaining approvals for their plans.

She brought to their attention a formal request made by the coalition to the United Nations, which asked that the Biosphere Reserve designation of the escarpment be "temporarily suspended."

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designated the Niagara Escarpment as a Biosphere Reserve in 1990, which tells the world Ontario has something special, unique and worth protecting, Halsall said.

"Halton says it is a world class place to be, yet we have a group wanting to take that designation away," she said.

McClure defended the request, arguing the NEC itself was putting the designation "at risk" by not following the criteria of being a Biosphere Reserve. The request to temporarily suspend the designation is only a tactic to force the NEC to adhere to its rules, he said.

The designation was based on the NEC's 1985 plan, but the changes expected with the five year review will alter the very reason it was given the biosphere reserve in the first place, he argued.

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