

Hydro merger 'poppcock'— Mayor

By **CYNTHIA GAMBLE**
Staff Writer

If Mayor Rick Bonnette had his wish it would be lights out on a recent provincial report calling for the merger of smaller hydro utility companies into larger regional entities.

After hearing Halton Hills Hydro Inc. President and CEO Art Skidmore outline the local utility's performance in 2012 at last week's council meeting, Bonnette said the Electricity Distribution Sector Review Panel's recommendation, "for a forced merger within two years is a lot of poppycock!"

"We may get an offer down the road that makes sense but don't force us try to sell our hydro. I think all you're going to see is a monopoly and that's something I'm really concerned about," said the mayor. "We're hoping this isn't going to go any further but if it does, they're going to have a fight on their hands. Halton Hills is going to be standing up and we're going to be counted."

Skidmore, too, was unimpressed with the three-party recommendations, saying his presentation proved "Halton Hills Hydro customers are already receiving a strong value proposition."

Skidmore said the panel calculates mergers of the province's 73 utilities into 8-12 regional distributors, with a minimum of 400,000 customers (which equals one household), would mean about \$70/year savings for customers by the end of the tenth year.

"If you're amalgamated and there's a pole at the corner of Maple and Trafalgar that needs to be fixed or a pole down on Lakeshore that has to get fixed" which do you think would get priority, he asked.

"They talk about financial benefits and certainly arguably they could be there, they could not be there, but I think they missed the point on customer service," said Skidmore.

Council passed a resolution to request a staff report on the panel's recommendations with a Town resolution to be presented at Tuesday's council meeting.

Skidmore, in his presentation, outlined

"strong reasons to keep a local presence for the utility."

Some of those reasons include:

- Halton Hills Hydro has the lowest residential distribution rates in Halton.
- Is ranked sixth out of 43 utilities, based on its operations, maintenance and administration costs
- Is ranked fourth of 12 in mid-size GTA utilities based on unit cost
 - In 2012, answered 21,287 customer calls, met with 4,313 customers, prepared 1,118 written responses to customers and responded to 290 after-hours no power calls.
 - The utility has provided \$1.95 million in interest and dividend payments in 2012 to its sole shareholder— The Town of Halton Hills. Its book value has increased by \$8.3 million to more than \$40 million.
 - The system average interruption duration index was 1.53 hours, down from 2 hours in 2009. The customer average interruption duration index was just under an hour, down from 1.35 hours in 2009.
- In a 2012 survey, 93 per cent of customers were very or fairly satisfied with Halton Hills Hydro. That compares with the provincial and national averages of 84% and 89% respectively.
- Halton Hills Hydro launched a Facebook page last April and a LinkedIn page in November. On its website, the utility now has a special tab listing emergencies and outages. Skidmore urged residents to go to HHH's social media sites to become more involved with the utility including the ability to see your usage online.
- "Conservation is a big part of our core business," said Skidmore, and HHH is ranked 25th out of 76 in the province for reaching its energy savings target. In addition to its numerous conservation programs, HHH in November began installing more than 200 solar panels in various areas in the communities.

Halton Hills Hydro has 23,000 customers served by 51 staff members who take care of 1,464 kilometres of power lines, 3,828 distribution transformers, and seven supply points. Its staff has worked 604 days without a lost time incident.



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