

Community presses council for GRM answers

By Paul Baswick

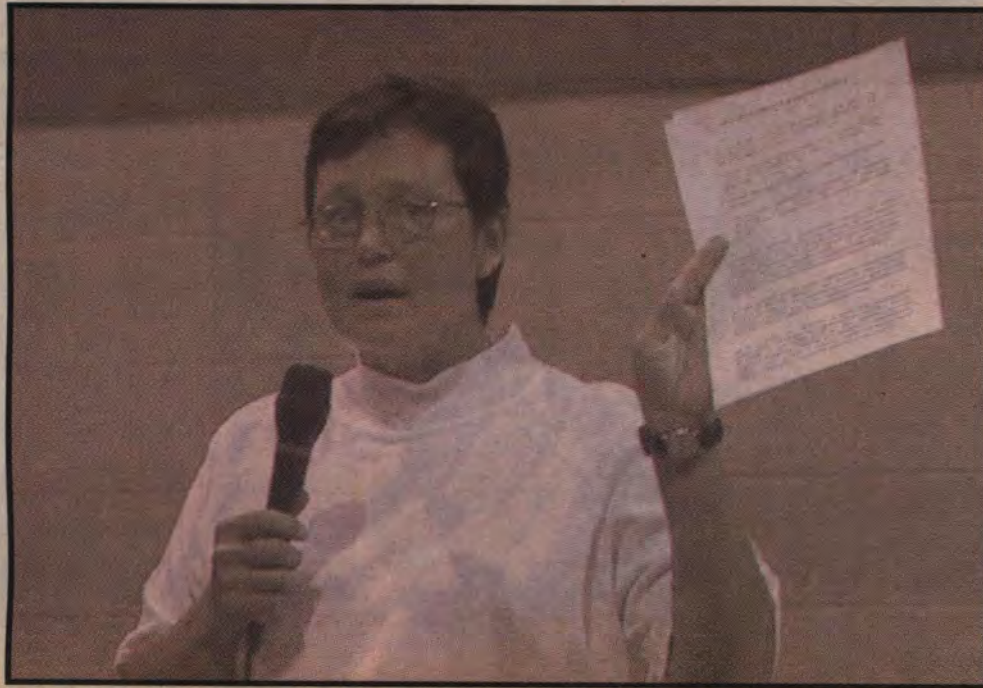
OHSWEKEN — Persistent questions surrounding the failed Grand River Mills project were taken off the back burner at a joint council/community meeting at J.C. Hill Elementary School Thursday night, although the evening appeared to produce little more than luke-warm results.

The meeting, called by the Six Nations Community Action Group, was convened to give band council an opportunity to respond to outstanding questions concerning the project. But as group spokesperson Audrey Hill concluded at the session's end, the answers provided by council weren't comprehensive enough to finally put the GRM issue to rest.

"We'll continue to discuss our concerns because we still haven't gotten a lot of our questions answered. If anything [council has] raised a lot more questions," she said.

There appeared to be a stark imbalance as to the priority council and community members had given to the meeting. While community support was strong with almost 100 participants, only five of the twelve band councillors — Don Whitlow, Roger Jonathan, Delby Powless, David General, and Nina Burnham — joined Chief Wellington Staats in facing questions from the meeting's participants.

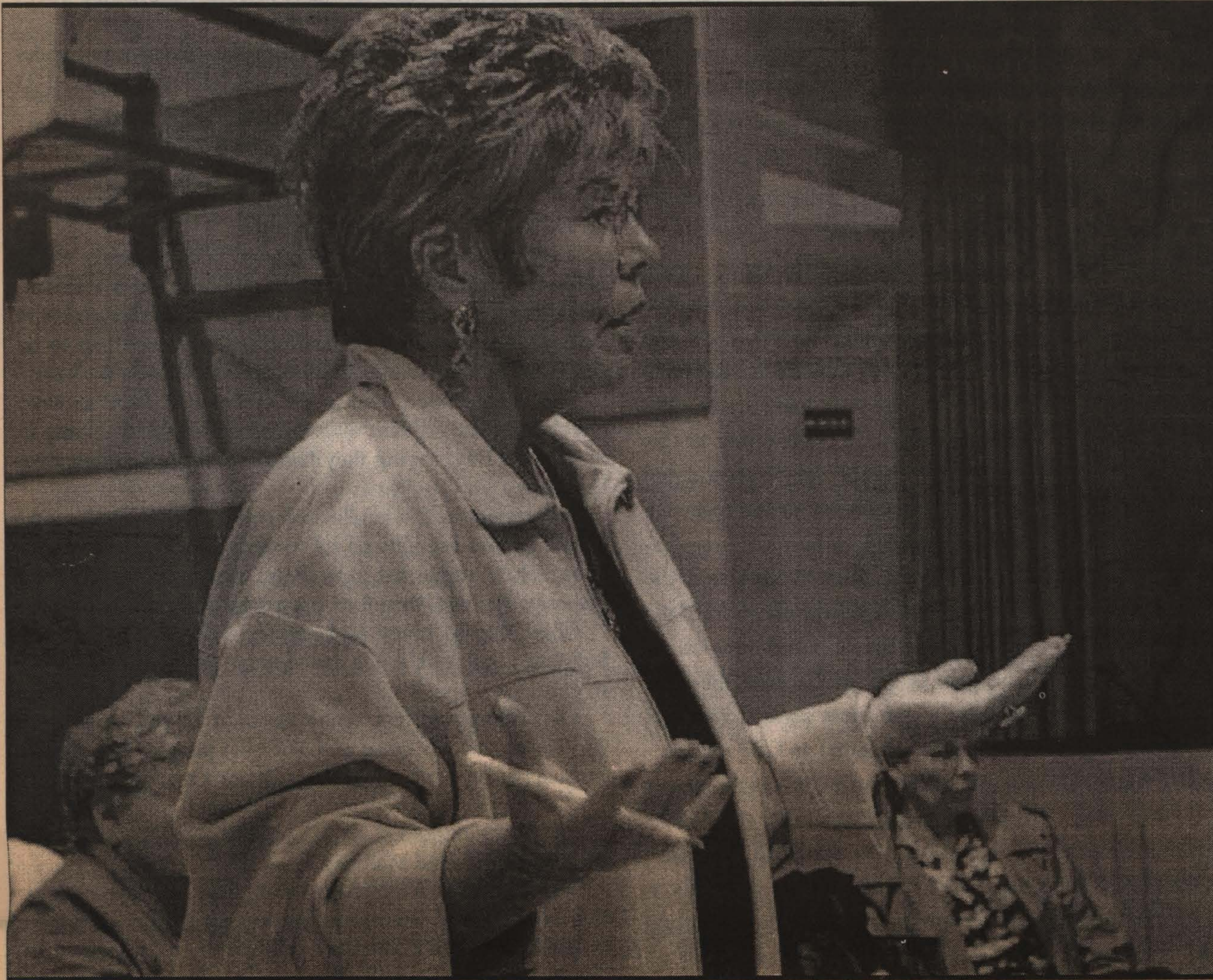
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Six Nations Community Action Group spokesperson Audrey Hill holds up a list of questions relating to the failed Grand River Mills project. The community directed the questions at band council during Thursday night's meeting at J.C. Hill Elementary School.

Questions over GRM produce few answers at community/council meeting

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Former Ontario Ombudsman Roberta Jamieson tells councillors at Thursday's meeting at J.C. Hill that Six Nations' elected officials need to make greater efforts to open the lines of communication with the community.

That imbalance proved to affect the detail in which council was able to answer the bulk of the community's questions, as the majority centred on transactions dealing with absent Economic Development Committee director Ken Hill, without whom councillors said they weren't in a position to answer.

There were indications, too, that the councillors attending the meeting weren't anxious to revisit recurring questions concerning GRM.

Councillor Don Whitlow said that while he was

impressed by the initiative shown by the community in their strong numbers Thursday, he suggested their efforts should be put to better use.

"If we could get all this kind of focus behind us about our health and education we'd have something. But you take something like this, where everybody just seems to come out and jump all over everybody, we're never going to get anything done like that. We've got to start working together."

Councillor Nina Burnham also objected to what she

apparently considered the adversarial nature of the meeting which she says pitted the community against council.

Burnham asked how those at the meeting could be concerned with "finger pointing" so soon after the recent terrorist attacks in the United States.

One community participant responded that "that's the most disrespectful piece of crap I've ever heard in my life."

The GRM issues that seemed to carry the most momentum at Thursday's meeting were those not reliant on either a precise accounting of figures or the input of absentee council members.

Among them was the recommendation made by KPMG in its audit of the GRM project last year that council establish clear conflict of interest guidelines.

Chief Staats that the issue was already addressed before the audit, as council has had conflict of interest guidelines in place for several years.

"If council has clear conflict of interest guidelines," asked Helen Miller, "why would the auditors recommend establishing clear conflict of interest guidelines?"

Staats responded that he wasn't sure if KPMG had taken a look at band council's existing guidelines when they made their recommendation.

Roberta Jamieson, who served as Ontario's first native ombudsman, noted that a large part of the problem between council and the community has to do with the fact the community feels very left in the dark when it comes to matters of council.

"They are worried. They are concerned. There are allegations flying back and forth and there are not a lot of facts still, and that atmosphere continues when we are vague and have a lack of understanding."

Although she said Thursday's meeting with council left many questions concerning GRM unresolved, Community Action Group spokesperson Audrey Hill said the community will continue to press the issues with council. She says concerned community members are invited to attend the group's weekly meetings at the Gathering Place on Seneca Road Wednesday nights.

She added that the group will also organize a follow-up meeting with council within the next three to four weeks.



While Thursday's meeting drew close to a hundred community members, only five councillors joined the chief in facing questions relating to Grand River Mills.