Anti-tower lawyers say assessment flawed

BY ROY GREEN
Staff Writer

Lawyers battling Hydro One's plans to install high-capacity transmission towers from Markham to Newmarket say the environmental assessment process for the project is flawed and should be suspended.

In an 18-page letter to Hydro One president and CEO Tom Parkinson, Gowling Lafleur Henderson said it is illegal for Hydro One to seek approval for the project until the company's entire 10-year transmission plan undergoes an environmental assessment.

The law firm, which represents the anti-tower group known as the Hydro One task force, also said the company should not be seeking approval under a class EA, but instead should go through a much more demanding individual EA.

Aurora Councillor Phyllis Morris said Hydro One sent a one-paragraph response to the letter.

"They merely said, 'We disagree'," Ms Morris said Thursday.

The task force, made up of elected officials, municipal employees and residents from across the region, also took the fight to new fronts this week, trying to enlist the support of MPPs and MPs in York Region.

The region, Catholic school board, the councils in Markham, Aurora, Vaughan and King have also expressed opposition to the project.

And there may be more opposition after Newmarket residents get their first look at the project at a public information meeting Wednesday night.

The task force legal fight is being funded by $100,000 from Markham council and, last week, Aurora council agreed in principle to add a maximum of $25,000.

Hydro One says it is looking at nine possible routes for the 230-kv service, but the current preferences include the 24-km hydro corridor from Markham or a 44-km line from Vaughan, both of which go through residential areas.

The company is expected to announce its final decision this fall and seek approvals from the Environment Ministry and the Ontario Energy Board.

About 1,500 Markham and Aurora residents, members of Stop Transmission Lines Over People (STOP), are concerned about the visual effects of the much higher towers, property values and potential health hazards from electromagnetic fields.

At a meeting with task force members Wednesday, Newmarket-Aurora MP Belinda Stronach was asked to see if there is any federal jurisdiction over hydro transmission lines.

"The No. 1 concern is that we do not jeopardize the health of residents," Ms Stronach said. "We have to find a win-win situation that will meet energy requirements as the region grows, but not at the expense of residents' health."

Vaughan-King-Aurora MPP Greg Sorbara, who met separately with members of STOP and the task force Thursday, said he advised them he could not take sides in the issue.

"As a cabinet minister, my responsibility is to make sure there is a fair process and a fair hearing on the project," Mr. Sorbara said Friday. "If I were to take sides, I would be in a conflict of interest that could not be rectified."

Despite the controversy in other areas of the region, Newmarket Mayor Tom Taylor said he has received only one request for information about the project from a resident. Wednesday's meeting is set for 7 p.m. at the Newmarket Theatre.

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