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Residents protest private power plant meeting

News

Nov 25, 2009

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Michael Ivanin/Special to the Beaver

Protesters gathered outside Otello's Banquet Hall prior to ...

Around 20 protesters briefly breached a restricted TransCanada meeting, Tuesday night, calling on those inside to halt plans to construct a 900-megawatt gas-fired power plant planned for the Ford-owned lands of 1500 Royal Windsor Dr.

The protesters, who included small children, only managed to get a few feet inside the doors of Otello's Banquet Hall and Conference Centre before several security personnel intercepted them.

Despite being contained to the doorway, the protesters made their presence known blasting the siren of a bullhorn and chanting over and over, 'It's not fair, we want clean air'.

Many protesters waved signs bearing slogans like, 'Power Plants and Homes Don't Mix,' while one woman even shone and intensely bright flashlight into the eyes of TransCanada employees as she questioned them about whether they were Oakville residents.

After a few moments the security personnel, who had formed a kind of human chain blocking the protesters, began moving forward and slowly pushed the protesters out of the banquet hall.

Outside the hall more than 200 protesters rallied, not only against the proposed power plant and the pollution they believe it will bring to their community, but also against the restricted nature of the TransCanada information meeting.

The meeting was only accessible to 39 representatives from 23 various residents' associations and community groups across Oakville and Mississauga.

These representatives had to adhere to a set of ground rules during the meeting, which included a two-minute speaking limit for each person.

Media and even Oakville's MPP Kevin Flynn were not permitted to attend.

As the drums and chanting of the protest rally echoed in the background, TransCanada Spokesperson Chris Breen explained what the company hoped to accomplish with its meeting.

"We thought that for the purposes of the environmental impact information, what we should do is invite delegations from the residents' associations, sit them down in a professionally facilitated session and bring the scientists who have done the environmental modeling and monitoring and testing and have them present what they did, how they did it and what the results were and give people an opportunity to ask some questions and better understand what is going on," said Breen.

"We're going to start to show the findings of the studies that we've done to date that prove there is no reason to have concerns for health and environmental impact as a result of this plant. Natural gas is a clean burning fuel for power production."

When asked why the meeting was not open to the public, Breen said

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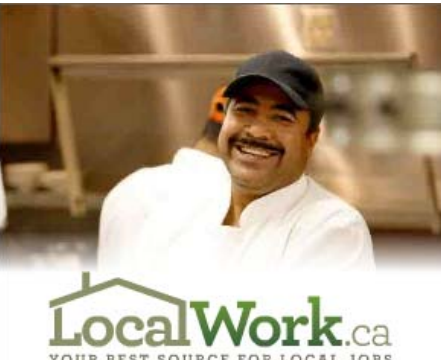
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TransCanada has already provided the public at large with plenty of opportunities to learn, speak and be heard.

Breen said TransCanada has already held two open houses with a third open house planned for January.

He said TransCanada has a project website featuring information about the project, an email address and a toll free number where people can contact them, as well as advertising and direct mail, which are being sent out into the community.

He further noted that TransCanada has volunteered to meet with any individual or group in the community who is concerned about the project.

Breen said the exclusion of the media from the meeting was done to allow those present to feel more comfortable about speaking.

"We invited people here tonight in order to allow them to be as comfortable as they could be in expressing their opinion and asking questions and having a good exchange with the health and environmental professionals," said Breen.

"For the actual session itself, we felt it was important to allow people to feel they weren't being recorded or viewed in a way they may have found either restrictive or somewhat intimidating."

Susan Hyatt, who sits on the board of Citizens For Clean Air (C4CA) and who lives less than a kilometer from the proposed power plant site, said one restricted meeting is not enough for Oakville residents.

"The residents are very concerned. They're asking for consultations with TransCanada. They want to know what's going on and they're upset and that's why they're here. They feel they're being left out of the process," said Hyatt.

"Two people per residents' association with a limit of two minutes is not what they want."

Citizens For Clean Air did have delegates attending the meeting and Hyatt herself attended as a representative of the Eighth Line Residents' Association.

Hyatt is aware of the complexity of attending a meeting while simultaneously protesting its inadequacy, but the presence of the representatives inside was necessary, she said.

"We're caught in a situation here where if we attend the meeting then people say, 'We consulted you,' even though you only get two minutes. If you don't attend the meeting then you are told you are not interested, there isn't a high level of interest," said Hyatt. "As a citizen you're really caught between a rock and a hard place."

The meeting lasted from around 7 p.m. until 10 p.m. with at least one residents' association representative noting little was accomplished in terms of quelling resident fears surrounding the power plant.

Mississauga Residents' Association Network representative Dorothy Tomiuk attended the meeting, which she said convened to the sound of the protest outside.

Tomiuk said the meeting was lacking in a number of areas with experts not present to answer questions about such issues as noise.

Tomiuk also had a problem with the presentations regarding the plant's impact on health and the environment.

"At one point, TransCanada said they didn't want to give us the data in raw form, but rather in summary form and of course there were a few snickers around the room at that point. That's when you can kind of lose the chain of custody," said Tomiuk.

"What was asked for last night was the raw data that was used to model those findings and the assumptions that were used to guide the modeling. I think there were certainly many specialists in the room, who would be capable of taking that data and manipulating it to determine just how conclusive the findings are."

Tomiuk also asked for the next meeting to be public and for more work to be done concerning wind studies.

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