

Gas power plant needs buffer zone

Doug Mackenzie, National Post · Tuesday, May 11, 2010

The Province of Ontario recently announced \$8-billion in wind and solar power projects, proclaiming Ontario a "global leader." But as we clamour to replace dirty coal with renewable sources of clean energy, let's not lose sight of the fact that natural gas-fired power plants are being built across the GTA to provide electricity when the wind doesn't blow or the sun doesn't shine.

While cleaner than the coal they replace, gas-fired plants burn fossil fuels and emit thousands of tons of greenhouse gases every day they operate. Further, natural gas power plants are not without risk, as the explosion at one such facility in Connecticut, sadly illustrated two months ago. That accident killed six workers and injured 26, blowing out windows in a hospital three kilometres away.

The 683 megawatt generating station that sits on 79 acres in Halton Hills will be the third large gas power plant to go on line this year when it goes on line this June. The Portlands Energy Centre in downtown Toronto is a 550 megawatt gas plant. That plant is more than one kilometre away from the nearest residential neighbourhood. By way of comparison, the Oakville Generating Station would be the largest in Canada at 975 megawatts, sited on only 13.5 acres next to a major residential neighbourhood. The site is so small and so close to people that a 1.5 megawatt wind turbine would not be permitted.

Thousands of homes, 16 schools, the Town Hall and the local hospital all sit within roughly two kilometres of the power plant. The location is so tight that Trans Canada, the company that will operate the power plant, cannot use a water-cooled gas-fired station, which most are in Ontario. Instead, the Oakville plant will draw millions of litres of water from a nearby lake every day it operates in order to cool the system. The resulting vapour plume could pose some serious safety risks and comes down as fog or ice on busy commuter rail lines and highways, but it seems these risks have not been fully considered.

Concerns about the proximity of gas power plants are not limited to Ontario. In Shreveport, La., the fire chief is lobbying for the town's main fire hall and administrative offices, built only five years ago, because they are too close to a new 508 megawatt gas-fired power plant. "If there is a catastrophic event at this station, which is the main fire station for the city, [we will have to] respond, because we can't get out," Shreveport Fire Chief Brian Crawford told local media.

Despite the best laid plans, accidents happen. People make mistakes. And, pertinent for the Oakville location, train accidents happened twice in the past few weeks in the GTA, once in Pickering and more recently in Oakville.

Spotting a gap in current regulations Oakville's MPP, Kevin Flynn, has proposed a private member's bill that would require a 100-metre buffer zone between natural gas power plants and land zoned for homes, schools or hospitals. Like thousands of other gas power plants in Oakville and Mississauga, Mr. Flynn wonders how the OPA could choose a site that is so different from every other gas power plant in the province. Mr. Flynn's freedom of information requests have been rejected by the OPA management in violation of its own refusal to adhere to one of its own guiding principles, transparency.

The OPA's chief executive, Colin Andersen, explained the selection of the Oakville site recently as follows: "Each project was evaluated against a number of factors, such as environmental assessment, engineering design, construction arrangements, cost, and safety. Safety, it seems, is simply not a factor. In fact, the word safety does not appear in the OPA mandate, which raises the question: What is the job of the OPA? Is it to ensure Ontario's power plants are safe for the communities they serve?"

It seems a law is required to ensure common sense prevails. Every community in Ontario deserves to know that the provide us with a reliable source of energy will be built away from people's homes, schools and hospitals. The buffe way to ensure that in the event of an accident, people are a safe distance away.

- Doug MacKenzie is president of Citizens for Clean Air, a coalition of concerned citizens and organizations calling fo on the proposed 975 megawatt gas fired power plant in the Oakville/Mississauga community in view of apparent s

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