**MEETING OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND WASTE WATER MANAGEMENT**

**MARCH 30 2021**

**Discussion of Motion opposing Chalk River Nuclear Waste Facility**

There has been much news coverage concerning Councillor Theresa Kavanaugh’s motion opposing two proposed  nuclear waste sites at Chalk River, the first a “near surface disposal facility” (NSDF), a giant mound which would be used to store radioactive waste less than a kilometre from the Ottawa River, and second, the decommissioning of the defunct and contaminated NPD reactor at Rolphton, which is within 100 metres of the Ottawa River, by the process of entombment, leaving it in place and encasing it in concrete.

In the end, the motion was amended to reflect concerns about the proposed facilities rather than the opposition to the building of the sites. Donna Bowen-Willer  attended  the 8 hour long public discussion at the Standing Committee on Environmental Protection and Waste Water Management and spoke for First U supporting the original motion.  The amended motion was passed and will go to city council.

**Presentation Made to the SCEPWWM on behalf of First Unitarian Congregation:**

My name is Donna Bowen-Willer. I am speaking on behalf of the First Unitarian Congregation of Ottawa, where I am a member of our Environmental Action Group. One of our Unitarian Principles is the “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

We are speaking in favour of the motion to join with over 140 municipalities, including the city of Gatineau and the Montreal Municipal Council, who have passed resolutions opposing Canadian Nuclear Laboratories’ radioactive waste plans upstream from Ottawa at the Chalk River Laboratories.

We are apprehensive about this situation for four main reasons: what will be stored in the Near Surface Disposal Facility; the possibility of leakage; where it is situated; and the risk of radioactive materials reaching the Ottawa River.

We are not confident that the proposed “Near Surface Disposal Facility” is safe. This is a huge, seven story, engineered, above ground disposal mound meant to house one million cubic metres of solid waste, classified by the CNL as “low level” waste. However, we share the concerns of the Concerned Citizens of Renfrew County and Area, who recently made available information on the environmental impact statement submitted by the CNL in December 2020, which listed a partial inventory of radionuclides including hundreds of radioactive materials, including tritium, carbon-14, strontium-90, cobalt- 60, four types of plutonium, up to 80 tonnes of uranium, and including a number of radionuclides which have half-lives longer than the planned life of the base and cover membranes of the facility. In addition, partial inventories list hazardous chemicals, like dioxins, PCBs, asbestos, mercury, arsenic and lead along with tonnes of heavy metals whose value may cause attempted scavenging and damage to both the scavengers and the protective seals. We are not convinced that these items can be classified as “low level” and question whether they meet International Atomic Energy Agency standards for an above ground facility. See: <https://concernedcitizens.net/2021/02/22/what-would-go-into-the-chalk-river-mound-2/>

Dr. Ole Hendrickson, from the Concerned Citizens, uses the CNL’s own final environmental impact statement to evaluate the very real dangers of leakage of radioactive and hazardous contents from the containment mound, into the Ottawa River. During the filling of the mound, some, but not all, contaminants will be removed by a water treatment plant before release to the wetlands or delivery to Perch Lake. Tritium for example does not respond to water treatment, nor do some other toxic substances. In addition, there is a risk that storms and extreme rainfall could cause overflowing or erosion, washing hazardous substances into low areas. Once the dumping is ended, the top cover would be placed over the wastes. However, the EIS recognizes that eventually, with normal erosion, storms, animals etc, the top cover will eventually disintegrate, exposing the contents to rain and snow, leaching once again the radioactive contents, allowing them to rise and spill over the berm, moving to Perch Creek and the Ottawa River…not if but when. See: <https://concernedcitizens.net/2021/02/23/how-would-the-near-surface-disposal-facility-leak-let-us-count-some-of-the-ways/>

This will be exacerbated by the positioning of this site. The facility will be situated on the site of the Chalk River Laboratories, less than a kilometre from the Ottawa River. The river itself is a fault line. We understand the proposed area has underlying porous bed rock, and is in an area predisposed to tornedos and earth quakes, which may well increase with an expected increase in extreme weather incidents. It borders on wetlands; wastes would flow directly into Perch Lake and eventually in to the Ottawa River. So there is genuine risk of radioactive materials present in both surface and ground water eventually reaching the Ottawa River.

While it is important that nuclear waste be disposed of, safer options protecting the waste facilities from extreme events like earth quakes, floods and tornedos, unexpected damage, and normal everyday wear, demand it be buried in caverns, vaults or silos in secure, isolated places away from water and groundwater resources and fault lines.

We share the fear of radioactive contamination of our water supply, and the resulting health risks, with those 140 municipalities, along with a number of indigenous organizations, various NGOs, scientists, environmentalists and concerned citizens.

We urge Chair Moffat, Vice Chair Menard, and the members of the Environmental Protection, Water and Waste Management Committee to approve this motion to oppose the proposed Near Surface Disposal Facility radioactive waste facility at Chalk River; and further, to encourage City Council to join with over 140 other municipalities who have passed resolutions opposing Canadian Nuclear Laboratories’ radioactive waste plans at the Chalk River Laboratories.

**What Happened at the Meeting?**

There was some feeling, almost of betrayal, among some of the delegates regarding the amendment of the motion, but Theresa Kavanagh, in the end said, this sometimes happens to motions, it was better than nothing, and at least there had been an enormous amount of discussion concerning the issue, both before and during the committee meeting. And the motion, in its amended form, would be taken to city council for discussion on April 14.

**Details of Discussion**

The first contribution was from Ian Douglas, a city water quality engineer, who felt the NSDF would be an improvement over leaving quantities of unprotected waste in situ as it is now. There were some staff concerns which were those outlined in the amended motion. I think staff had a strong influence on the amendments.

Delegations were allowed 5 minutes to present their concerns after which time the floor was opened to the committee for questions. There were about 30 participants, most of whom opposed the building of the NSDF in its present form and location, and the proposed method of entombing the NPD. These included nuclear scientists, radiation specialists, other scientists and medical specialists, NGO’s, environmental groups from Quebec and Ontario, and concerned citizens. There was general agreement that the nuclear waste at Chalk River and Rolphton did indeed need to be disposed of, but done so in an acceptable, internationally recognized manner. Most expressed strong concerns about the Canadian Nuclear Laboritories’ (CNL) proposals and lack of recognition of the true radioactivity and toxicity of the waste they propose to include in the NSDF, using terms like ‘low level’ and ‘short lived’ in a misleading and dishonest way, and of the danger to future generations of inevitable leakage from the NSDF into the surrounding wetlands and the Ottawa River. Most criticized the entombment approach in the decommissioning of the defunct and contaminated NPD reactor at Rolphton, which is within 100 metres of the Ottawa River, as insufficient according to the International Atomic Energy Agency guidelines, again presenting a genuine risk of radioactive contamination reaching the Ottawa River. In addition, many said they lacked confidence in the independence of the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission, the federal regulator, seeing them as working too closely with the CNL.

There were 2 delegations of the 30, supporting the waste site proposals.

The final part of the discussion included input from and questions to delegations from the owner of the site, Atomic Energy of Canada Ltd (AECL), the operator of the site, the Canadian Nuclear Laboratories (CNL), and the regulator of the site, Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission (CNSC). They all emphasized the safety of the site and the opportunity for further community input.

**How do I feel?**

It was a long, but very interesting day. On both sides of the issue are people who claim to be looking out for the best solution to a huge quantity of various levels of radioactive waste. I am, however, concerned that there seems to be such a discrepancy between what CNL insists is safe, although neither of their proposals has a proven history of safety, and what a number of very qualified scientists express as real concerns for future serious contamination of our drinking water, who insist that the proposals violate the principle that radioactive waste must be kept out of contact with the biosphere for as long as it remains radioactive. There is an unsettling feeling that CNL might be swayed by short term economic interests in downplaying the risks of the radioactive and toxic wastes which are planned for inclusion in the NSDF. What I heard from those who oppose the present proposals was not to do nothing, but to create world class facilities for our $8-10 billion of radioactive waste liability, which we are quite capable of doing were we to have strong federal government initiative. In addition, it was disconcerting to hear on more than one occasion a lack of trust in the independence of the CNSC from CNL influence.

If you are interested in more detail, or wish to see the motion or amended motion, get in touch with me.

Donna Bowen-Willer