



Photos by Karen Longwell

With the environmental screening report nearing release, the MNR clarifies misinformation on the project. The project is proposed at the site directly across the falls in this photo.

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MNR blasts 'Today' article on Bala Falls

The Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) is not “pulling the plug” on the Bala Falls hydroelectric project, despite reports to the contrary.

Swift River Energy Limited, the proponent of the project, has proposed a three- to -five-megawatt hydroelectric power facility at the south end of the north Bala Falls dam. Currently Swift River is completing a mandatory environmental screening report.

Trevor Griffin, area supervisor of the Bracebridge MNR office, said the MNR wanted to clarify some misinformation on the project that seemed to be floating around.

“From our perspective they (opponents of the Swift River hydro project) are throwing out a lot of red herrings to try to confuse the issue and that is why we want to make sure we clarify this process,” said Griffin.

The MNR wanted to address an article in the July 23 issue of Muskoka Today, which attributed some quotes to Rosalyn Lawrence, assistant deputy minister for the Natural Resource Management Division of the MNR.

“There were a number of comments in the article which she says are false,” said Griffin.

The article said Jeff Mole, with the Bala Community Association, met with Lawrence in July. Muskoka Today quotes Lawrence as saying the site release process “could have been more community friendly.”

Third-person quotes attributed to Lawrence through Mole said she “wasn’t thrilled” with the way the site release process came together. She was also quoted as saying “she would sleep on it (the project file).”

Quotes attributed to Lawrence were false, said Griffin.

The article indicated the MNR was going to be pulling the plug on the project and there are problems with the site release policy, said Griffin.

“That is not what our senior manager said to the opponent (Mole),” said Griffin. “They were false statements being attributed to her and that is what I was asked to clarify.”

Reached by telephone in Bala, Mole said he could not comment on the article “because of the complexities involved.”

Lois Cooper, editor of Muskoka Today, said attempts were made to contact Lawrence and calls were not returned. Cooper added that no one from the MNR has contacted her regarding the story.

Griffin also addressed suggestions that the south falls would be a more appropriate site for the hydroelectric project.

“The reason that the north dam was identified as a potential option ... is because we had Crown land on that site on both sides of the dam, so MNR controls the land around that dam. That is not the case at the south falls,” said Griffin.

Building a hydroelectric project at the south falls could present water level issues, he said.

“If you put something in that (south) channel and weren’t able to pass as much water out of the lake, that could cause problems for lake levels and our ability to manage flood waters,” Griffin said.

Jeff Mole still believes there is hope to save Bala Falls.

“I am still very confident that it (the hydroelectric proposal at Bala Falls) will not go ahead,” said Mole.

Mole said he would like to see politicians and community groups come together to designate the Bala Falls as a conservation reserve or waterway class park through Ontario Parks.

Griffin, while not in the parks branch of the MNR, also addressed the suggestion of designating Bala Falls as a conservation reserve.

“From what I understand, it (Bala Falls) would not be (a conservation reserve). The site is too small. It is already developed, there are already dams there,” Griffin said.

Protected areas are generally places of significant ecological, geological or cultural value, he said.

“It probably won’t meet those criteria,” said Griffin. “They (opponents) are coming up with ideas in opposition to the development that probably aren’t viable options.”

Meanwhile Karen McGhee, Bala project manager for Swift River, said the public review period for the environmental screening report should start by the third week of September.

Once released, the public will have one month to comment on the screening report. The report was originally expected last winter.

She said Swift River is incorporating comments from various government agencies into the report. It also did a few more studies to look at fish spawning and the esthetics of different water flows going over the dam, McGhee said.

Construction was to start this fall.

“That has been postponed. We won’t be starting now until 2010,” said McGhee.

McGhee said once the screening report is released, there will be a brief overview at a district council meeting. Swift River plans to hold a third open house in Bala.

Mole also said another town hall meeting is in the works for Oct. 10 at Bala Community Centre. Doors open at 9:30 a.m. and the meeting starts at 10 a.m.