

Don't sneer at local fears - the cause can be just  
July 08, 2009

Jim Coyle

It's been at the very least a little cheeky for Premier Dalton McGuinty and his deputy, over recent months, to dismiss those who would thwart their will as NIMBYists.

In particular, this was the epithet Energy Minister George Smitherman used on Ontarians opposed to the installation of wind turbines near their homes.

That health, aesthetic and property-value concerns should be raised about the implications of the Green Energy Act was only reasonable. That they'd be raised most passionately when intrusions become local and immediate, as opposed to abstract and elsewhere, is only human nature.

The active engagement of citizens concerned about decisions imposed on them from above and afar – especially in seeking to protect the health and wealth that constitutes their most precious assets – is more to be applauded than demeaned.

Across the province are numerous examples of local folks fighting just such David and Goliath battles.

In Dufferin County, near Shelburne, a controversy has been building over a land assembly that locals fear will turn 2,428 hectares of prime agricultural land into an aggregate quarry.

They're worried about the loss of non-renewable farmland, especially of a soil type unique to southern Ontario and conducive to high-quality potatoes. There is also, they say, the environmental consequence of deforestation and the impact on water, wildlife and wetlands.

"This is not a local issue," organizers maintain. "This is an issue for anyone who lives in Ontario, who eats food and drinks water."

Local food-processors get most of their potatoes from Dufferin County, one activist says, and "if the lands are turned into a pit (they) might as well take their jobs to Idaho or P.E.I., where the potatoes are."

On another front, NDP Leader Andrea Horwath was in Elmvale on the weekend to support local demands that the province stop the County of Simcoe from opening a landfill – known as dump Site 41 – on the Alliston aquifer.

"This beautiful spot is the wrong place to start dumping 40,000 tonnes of garbage a year," she said. "We should be protecting what scientists call one of the cleanest sources of water in the world."

On Monday, as the decades-long battle over the dump came to a head, native protesters – the longest-standing and most dogged of environmentalists – took the fight to the gates of the proposed site, demanding that McGuinty answer their pleas and step in.

"It's our duty as native peoples to be stewards of the land and protect our water," Elizabeth Brass Elson, speaking for the Beausoleil First Nation, told the *Barrie Advance*.

Meanwhile, from Gull Lake, near Minden, came word on the weekend that Suzanne Lauten was "on cloud nine."

Lauten is founder of the Cottagers Against Uranium Mining and Exploration, owns a cottage near land staked for uranium exploration, and reported that federal Green Party Leader Elizabeth May had agreed to be keynote speaker at the group's anti-uranium rally at Queen's Park in September.

Lauten also said that Dr. Helen Caldicott, the renowned Australian anti-nuclear activist, would be visiting Toronto in October to support the anti-uranium campaign.

Caldicott is billed, Lauten said, as "the single most articulate and passionate advocate of citizen action." And her visit will bring "two major green powerhouses" to Toronto in a matter of weeks.

"Humbly, I suggest to you: There's a story there."

There probably is. And not least of the tale, of course, is that, whether you're talking wind turbines, or mines or garbage dumps and their impact on potato fields, water supplies or cottage pleasures, one man's NIMBYism is another man's (or woman's) honourable uphill battle and just cause.

*Jim Coyle's provincial affairs column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.*