
BC's Local Political Leaders Reject Power Plan

Contributed by Mark Hume
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VANCOUVER -- Some 33 regional districts and municipalities in areas of British Columbia long courted by the government as the resource-rich "heartlands" have turned against the province in a battle over independent power projects.

In June 2006 the provincial government passed an amendment to Bill 30 that abolished local zoning authority so that no one can say no to a private power project on a river in BC.

Whistler Mayor Ken Melamed, a member of the Squamish-Lillooet Regional District, said yesterday that 33 local governments representing one million residents in B.C. are now calling on the province to set aside the amendment.

"What we are asking for is a regional planning process for IPPs with a meaningful public consultation component," he said.

He said there are 60 water licences in the approval process in the Squamish-Lillooet Regional District alone, and local governments have no authority to stop any of them.

"We have allowed 11 IPPs so far. We are enthusiastic about green power and IPPs. We just really believe that there should be a reasonable planning process so that the public can have input, so that we can set some guidelines and have some boundaries around it and essentially have some confidence that not every single one of these is going to get developed regardless of what the local residents say."

He said that green power, jobs and new investment are always welcomed by local governments, but there are growing concerns about the combined impact of access roads, transmission lines and substations.

Although IPPs are widely regarded as small power generating projects, many are major undertakings, Mr. Melamed said, and not all are environmentally benign.

"If we talk about the Ashlu River [a run-of-river project] the residents there maintain that where the IPP is being built is a magnificent canyon that has tremendous spiritual, environmental and economic benefits, from a tourism perspective, so there's a number of different ways of looking at these beyond the simple economical models or kilowatt generation."

He said the 33 local governments -- which include Hazelton, New Denver, Elkford, Alert Bay, Keremeos and Osoyoos -- will put forward a resolution at an upcoming Union of B.C. Municipalities annual

meeting, calling on the province to set aside the Bill 30 amendment.

The development is an unsettling one for the Liberal government, which has long sought to build political support in rural areas by extolling the importance of co-operation between Victoria and the heartland regions of B.C.

In 2004, the province signed a memorandum of understanding on IPPs with the UBCM, calling for closer co-operation, collaboration and harmonization between local, regional and provincial governments.

Although changes to Bill 30 seem to have shaken the relationship between the province and at least some rural regional districts, Richard Neufeld, Minister of Energy and Mines, defended the amendment, saying it was needed to bring the IPPs into line with other resource industries in the province.

"What it does is it puts electricity generation on the same level . . . as mining, oil and gas, agriculture and forestry. Prior to that there was a patchwork. Different regional districts . . . had different regulations and different rules. It was difficult for the IPP industry to know what they should do and what they shouldn't do," he said.

"So what we decided to do was to level the playing field, make it the same as all our other natural resource industries."

Mr. Neufeld said with growing interest in the private sector in power generation, the government needed to give industry a clear set of rules on how to operate.

He said the province still intends to seek input from local governments on IPPs.

"We do that now with forestry, oil and gas and mining -- all those industries. We take into consideration what regional districts and municipalities have to tell us," he said. "Obviously they are the ones that live there and we respect that information. Will it always be the way a certain regional district wants it or not? I can't guarantee that."

The Independent Power Producers Association of B.C. couldn't be reached for comment yesterday, but the organization had long urged the province to remove the zoning authority of regional districts, saying IPPs were being subject to "discriminatory and arbitrary levies."