

Why a moratorium on Muskrat Falls is needed

Written by Petrina Beals, Executive Director Mokami Status of Women Centre, Happy Valley-Goose Bay

As the provincial election heats up, so too does the debate about whether the hydroelectric development of Muskrat Falls is a good deal for people in this province. One of the main criticisms leveled at the new hydro-electric generating station at Muskrat Falls in Labrador is that it will not lower energy costs for people in the province, yet Nova Scotians will get the power for half the price.

If you want to talk about who will pay the cost for this development, let's talk about the impact it will have on the local community of Happy Valley–Goose Bay, the nearest community to Muskrat Falls on the Lower Churchill River where it opens into Melville Lake before flowing into the Atlantic Ocean.

Provincial crown corporation Nalcor surprisingly claimed there would *be no long-term socio economic impacts from its economic development on the community of Happy Valley/Goose Bay* in its Environmental Impact statement to the federal-provincial environmental assessment panel last April. How could that be when an estimated 5,000 mainly male workers will move into our town of 7,500 to build the dam over 5 years?

Nor should we overlook the fact that our community is already struggling with violence against women, a severe shortage of affordable housing and childcare, and growing poverty, mental health, addictions and substance use issues. The research, we presented to the panel showed this kind of large-scale development means we can expect other problems to develop, problems we are not going to be able to respond to effectively given our current situation of limited and strained resources and services.

Fortunately, the Environmental Assessment Panel came to our community to hear our concerns about the likely impact of this development on us – something Nalcor did not do. The Environmental Assessment panel recognized *that the effects of the Project on community and family life would be experienced primarily in Sheshatshiu and Happy Valley-Goose Bay.*” (p, 217,) *that the impact would be serious and that disadvantaged women and children would be particularly vulnerable.*” (p. 219) *“The Panel concludes that it is likely that there would be adverse effects in Happy Valley-Goose Bay resulting from high-wage employment, including increased substance abuse, sexual assault and violence against women and children.”* (p. 219)

The panel essentially called for a moratorium on further development when they called for further analysis of the projected benefits, including looking at the economic case for the project and other energy options, before continuing with the project.

But if this project does go ahead, the EA Panel recognized it is essential that the community be involved in identifying the social effects and needs arising from this development (a social effects needs assessment). They also called for the community to be engaged in advance of development, in participatory research that would establish key social indicators, collect baseline data, provide recommendations to prevent and address negative social effects (mitigation measures) and establish an approach to on-going monitoring. (Recommendation 13.2 Social effects needs assessment and research).

If the Project is approved, the EA Panel also recommends that before construction begins, Nalcor support the efforts of the Town of Happy Valley-Goose Bay, relevant federal and provincial departments, and local low-income housing agencies, to develop and implement a strategy to set measurable targets, address the existing low-income housing needs, and mitigate the adverse impacts of Project-related in-migration on low-income housing. (Recommendation 13.8 Low-income housing strategy)

Before this hydroelectric generation station at Muskrat Falls goes ahead, there must be a genuine, shared commitment by Nalcor and the provincial government with the local community to ensure community sustainability and economic development in a way that ensures social well-being and development occur alongside economic benefits for people now and well into the future.

Developments have the potential to bring tremendous benefits to communities, but also tremendous risks particularly for certain subpopulations. We must be careful that the benefits which should accrue to Labrador and its peoples do not come at a price the local community and its most vulnerable members cannot afford.

[Published September 24, 2011 in *The St. John's Telegram*]