

Opinion and Letters

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Is the crowd always right?

There are some very well-organized activists in Prescott-Russell. Take NZAP (No Zoning for Asphalt Plant), as an example. The group protested a potential asphalt plant near Jessup's Falls by packing meetings, organizing delegations, and making signs – for years. There's also Save The Nation, an anti-wind farm group whose organizers mustered impressive numbers on short notice.

By showing up at the right meetings and knowing what to ask for, both groups scored major victories in 2015. Sure, neither issue is closed permanently – both are ultimately provincial – but in July, The Nation's municipal council did reverse a series of decisions it had made months earlier, citing public pressure. United Counties councillors sided with NZAP in an important vote, ignoring advice from UCPR planning staff.

Last week, The Review featured a story about clear-cutting on its front page. It's an issue very much like wind farms or asphalt plants: it's about the environment, land use, and the debate centers around how to balance your right to do what you want on your land versus how that affects your neighbors and the larger community.

When it came to Jessup's Falls, council sided with concerned neighbours over a single property owner. The Nation council seemingly adopted a similar position when it sided with Save The Nation, instead of residents who wouldn't mind renting out a piece of property to a wind energy company.

From the outside, it might appear that our local politicians are quick to favour the collective over the interests of a single property owner. Which is strange, because both UCPR Warden Robert Kirby and The Nation Mayor Francois St-Amour have

expressed, in public meetings, a reluctance to tell people what to do on their land.

There's a simpler explanation: that decisions are being made based on the size of the crowd in the room. It's great that protest groups can enact real change, but it's not fair that it takes the well-organized efforts of a citizen group for local governments to engage with difficult issues. These groups need leaders who know how to find out exactly which vote will be important, what legislation is needed, and how to get a crowd to a meeting - which isn't easy. It takes resources, time, and talent.

And crucially, protest groups rarely bring the complete picture on a subject. There's a lot of misinformation out there about wind turbines, for example, mixed in with legitimate concerns. You'd think it would be the government's job to sort through what's true and what's not, but that's not what happened. If a decision is completely reversed after public pressure, it makes you wonder how and why the initial decision was made.

Clear-cutting has cycled back into the news because of a forest-cover report presented at the counties. It "might" come back before council, according to the Warden Kirby, but in general, people hoping for big change might be waiting a while. There's no important vote scheduled, and you won't see many signs along county roads.

There are people who are devastated by what's happening and others who are horrified by even the idea of a bylaw.

What eventually happens might be depend on who's more organized.

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