

Hydro hurting locals

By **Tony Pearson**

Dozens of people turned out last week to share tales of abuse of power ? the power supplied by Ontario's Hydro One. One after another, residents came forward to chronicle their ever-rising hydro bills, which in many cases now exceed housing costs. Speaker after speaker identified how often they were forced to make choices between essentials, skimping on food in order to pay for their electricity.

The pre-eminent case was that of Peggy Mills, a 74-year-old resident of McArthur Mills east of Bancroft and the focus of a Toronto Star inquiry into hydro costs. Mills had disconnected her stove, phone, television, and dryer in an attempt to reduce her electricity costs. Just when she had been approved for energy saving appliances, Hydro One disconnected her power. Although her power consumption only cost \$49 a month, the delivery charges were almost twice that amount.

She had also been charged \$90 a month in an effort to repay about \$2500 in back charges. When Hydro increased that sum to \$450 monthly, Mills ? whose total annual income is below \$20,000 - threw in the towel. Now, with no power to run her pump, she has to come in to Bancroft several times a week to get water as well as wash and bathe.

Mills wasn't the only one with a horror story about Hydro One. Single mothers noted that increasing power bills forced them to eliminate after-school activities for their children. Others observed that they were cutting out their home heating at the beginning of spring, forcing them to endure without heat during April and May cold snaps. Increasing bills can put any homeowner into a panic, they do not want to be paying out excessively just to keep warm, this can be exacerbated if their heating system is not fully functioning making it work harder, driving up their bill. This can be helped by calling in a heating engineer similar to onehourmagic, which homeowners can Visit Website and see what services are available to them to help get it sorted.

North Hastings Community Trust director Jane Kali, Hastings Highlands Mayor Vivian Bloom, and provincial member of Parliament Todd Smith all noted that they receive several calls a week from people facing or enduring an electricity cut-off. Smith noted that people were losing homes because they couldn't afford both hydro and a mortgage. Kali stated that for some the choice was "heating or eating."

Many questions were raised about Hydro One practices which inflicted particular pain on customers in rural areas. A report by the United Way of Bruce Grey counties noted that in rural areas, electricity costs had doubled in a decade. Rural customers, they reported, pay almost double in delivery charges compared to city dwellers. Bancroft Councillor Bill Kilpatrick noted that in Kingston, monthly bills for \$200 were considered high, while Bancroft fees on equalized payments ordinarily ran higher than \$350, and winter charges were often over \$700 a month.

Smith stated that the provincial government was over-investing in new energy sources, like solar. "The Auditor-General reported that we have paid nearly \$10 billion for these over-priced contracts, and we will pay \$37 billion over the contracts' life. Yet we've mothballed power-producing river dams. Actual hydro power is renewable, green, and inexpensive. Run-of-River power costs three cents a kilowatt hour, while we're paying 80 cents on solar energy contracts. No wonder Quebec and Manitoba pay so much less for their electricity."

As for immediate action, a call by Kali and Kilpatrick for a halt to disconnections of electricity, as well as power restrictors and large re-connection fees, met with loud and prolonged applause. Kali called such disconnections "atrocious, mean-spirited, and downright inhumane," especially given that in rural areas, this meant loss of access to water.

"This is a crisis," insisted Kilpatrick, predicting even more hikes in delivery charges and Hydro debt re-payment fees. Yet Smith reported that the new provincial Minister of Energy has declared that there is no crisis on hydro rates, despite all the calls for action. He believed that more protests at Queen's Park are needed. Bloom is also encouraging action by the Rural Mayors' Group. Kali forecast plans to bring anti-poverty groups across rural Ontario into coordinated action, on this and other issues vital to low-income

areas, such as food security. All agreed that "the time to act is now."