



Alternatives North

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Inadequately funded organizations are deprived of a voice in pipeline review

(*Yellowknife*) Alternatives North is again sounding a warning that inadequate funding and overly strict rules are preventing groups and individuals from participating fully in the Joint Review Panel (JRP) process for the Mackenzie Gas Project (MGP).

The criticisms are being made in relation to new hearings now scheduled for Inuvik, July 9 – 11. At those hearings, the proponents and their consultants are going to be answering questions about the latest project cost estimates and the revised forecast of economic impacts.

“Everyone is complaining about the length of time that the review process has been taking,” said Alternatives North spokesperson, Shelagh Montgomery, “but no one is worse off than non-profit and individual intervenors whose money to participate in the process is totally inadequate for the extended hearings.”

Alternatives North received initial funding from the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency and has been successful in raising additional funds from other agencies to pay for research to be done. With that money, the group has commissioned sociologists, resource economists, development economists, public policy experts, legal advisors, and anthropologists.

“Alternatives North has been able to make an important and responsible contribution to the assessment process using the money we’ve received,” Montgomery said, “but what we have is entirely committed based upon previously released JRP hearing schedules. We have no new funds for the new hearings.”

The lack of additional funds for the extended hearing schedule is only a part of the problem. The JRP refuses to allow registered intervenors to question witnesses by telephone. The JRP’s operating policies work against a free and open discussion of the merits of the proposed pipeline.

“It’s the height of irony that a process mandated to be ‘flexible and informal’ in fact has created a regime less flexible and more formal than the legalistic National Energy Board process,” Montgomery said.

“We find it more than a little strange that the National Energy Board is prepared to allow telephone participation but the JRP won’t. The National Energy Board is created and operates under strict legal and regulatory controls while the JRP is a negotiated process between a number of affected parties. Despite this, the JRP is much more rigid, too rigid, in fact. Non-business and non-governmental intervenors in the process can’t help but conclude the JRP is not committed to a free and open discussion of the issues.”

Intervenors do have the opportunity to submit written Information Requests (IRs) to the proponent but Montgomery says there are problems with the process.

“Alternatives North has submitted IRs in earlier rounds and we have been very disappointed with the results. We feel that we were consistently stonewalled and don’t really see it as a very useful process. Furthermore, the IR process is also highly structured and it costs a lot in time and money to do the work that is required, time and money that voluntary organizations simply don’t have enough of.

“The IR process is not nearly as effective for drawing out responses as direct questioning, be it by telephone or in person,” Montgomery said.