

Uranium foes seek lake associations' help

Open pit mine doesn't belong in cottage country, former MP says

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Roger Young lives on one of those cottage roads that seem to never end. A few minutes after turning west off Glamorgan Road you think surely you must have missed his place because no one could live this far into the forest. But no, his directions say keep on going.

So you stop worrying and start to enjoy the drive. Everything is still and peaceful. The sun is still bright on this February afternoon and as it sinks closer to the horizon its brilliance is cut into a thousand slivers by the passing tree trunks. You start to forget the pressures of life and give yourself in to the beauty around you.

By the time the road finally does end at Young's home on the shores of Little Glamor Lake, you no longer need to ask him why he decided to retire here. Who wouldn't want to live among such peaceful splendor?

Young has had a few regrets in life but moving to Haliburton is not one of them. Not yet. That may change, however, if his battle to stop Bancroft Uranium from blasting an open pit mine a few kilometres away is unsuccessful.

"Haliburton's my home," he says. "I did not come here to get involved [with local issues.] I'm retired, I've done my public service. But I'll be damned if I sit here and let something happen down the road that will have a negative impact on all of us. Open pit mines are an environmental disaster. Mining itself is boom and bust. It's long-term pain for short-term gain."

Almost in spite of himself, Young has become involved in the local campaign to prevent uranium mining in Haliburton County. As much as he'd like nothing more than to continue puttering around his almost finished home, he's spending more and more time on his computer doing research about uranium mining in general and Bancroft Uranium's plans in specific. And he's using his past experience with politics and the mining industry to come up with a campaign urging other Highlanders to join him.

Young had just graduated from law school when he jumped on the wave of Trudeaumania that was sweeping the country and rode it all the way to a job as special assistant to the first minister of mines and resources in the Trudeau government.

He'd grown up in Niagara where his father was deeply involved in the Liberal riding association. His mother's family had roots that went as deep into Conservative soil. "My mother's mother wouldn't speak to my father at election time," he laughs.

Judy LaMarsh had been the riding's Liberal MP but she had philosophical differences with Trudeau and decided not to run. Joe Green, who had been Minister of Agriculture in the previous Liberal government, decided to run in her stead. The riding association asked Young to get involved with the election and since he'd not yet decided what he wanted to do with his law degree, he said yes.

Green won the election and while he lost his job as Minister of Agriculture to a Western MP, he was given the new Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources portfolio. He asked Young to be his special assistant with particular responsibility for acting as a liaison with three federal agencies: Eldorado Nuclear, Atomic Energy of Canada and the Atomic Energy Control Board.

Eldorado was running a uranium mine in northern Saskatchewan and also managed the country's stockpile of uranium, which is one of Canada's most successful export commodities. (It's the demand for uranium in countries such as China that is driving up today's prices and enticing companies such as Bancroft Uranium into the exploration market. Old mining stakes are being re-visited now that it's more feasible to pay for getting the ore out of the ground.)

"Mining is big business," says Young, who was MP for a riding in the Niagara region from 1970 to 1975 before going into labour relations. "Canada as a nation has been successful largely because it's been a seller of resources. It's been a part of the overall economy. There's a cost to it, though. My concern is that Bancroft Uranium wants to run an open pit mine. That's total destruction of that part of the environment."

Bancroft Uranium has purchased the right to stake 9,000 hectares of Crown land near Tory Hill. Dating back centuries, the king, i.e. the Crown, gave people the right to farm his lands but he reserved the right to own whatever they'd find under the surface. If your plow turned up gold, that gold belonged to the crown.

When the Crown (the province of Ontario) started selling off some of its land, it also kept the rights to what lies beneath the surface. Many landowners don't realize that Ontario law gives prospectors the right to stake their properties. While Bancroft Uranium has staked Crown land, there are other companies in the area that have staked private property.

Why does Ontario allow such a practice? Young says, "The Crown is quite happy because if you do develop the land, the Crown will get money out of it and jobs will be created."

The problem with this approach to economic development, he adds, is that mining is, by its very nature, boom and bust. Unlike trees, which you can replace with other trees once you cut them, when all the ore is gone from the ground, it's gone. The mine closes; the jobs move somewhere else.

Young is not joining the argument about why countries want to buy uranium – the fuelling of nuclear power stations. But he is encouraging everyone to convince the provincial government not to allow uranium mines in Haliburton County.

"I'm trying to limit my concerns to the issue of an open pit mine," he says. "I don't care if it's an iron mine or a uranium mine or they're looking for chocolate chips."

If people think that opponents are suffering from the Not In My Back Yard syndrome, he points to the Ranger mine in Australia. Uranium was found in the middle of a national park so the government bent the rules and allowed 80 million metric tonnes of rock to be removed to get the one per cent of uranium ore. That required eight tonnes of explosives for every 30,000 tonnes of rock. The mine operated for 14 years, with blasting every second day.

If people don't fight against mining 9,000 hectares of Crown land near Tory Hill, Young argues, what argument will they have if uranium is found in, say, Algonquin Park? If Bancroft Uranium mines its entire stake, that's the size of five or six Kennisis Lakes.

With open pit blasting, Young says you'll have noise, vibration and dust. Mining the ore also exposes people and the environment to radioactivity.

As vice-president of the Glamour Lake ratepayers' association, he's witnessed the enormous success that Bonnie Fleishchaker has had in forming a coalition to advocate for lakeshore property owners in Haliburton County when it comes to water drawdowns for the Trent-Severn Waterway. He thinks that cottagers who don't want their investment in the natural beauty of the Highlands to be jeopardized in any way will provide the might in the uranium fight.

"Petitions get presented every day in the House of Commons. They get quickly filed and forgotten about. We need to get enough people bending the ear of their politicians because politicians have to get elected and re-elected.

"I do not think for one moment that the solution here lies in getting the ear of MPP Laurie Scott or even MP Barry Devolin. Where I believe there is much greater political influence and power is tapping into the muscle that is here through recreational property owners. They may be here only seasonally but that means they live somewhere else. If those opposed to an open pit mine can get the message to waterfront property owners then we're not talking about one provincial representative, we're talking 35 to 40.

"I won't tell you we have a big club. We have a lot of little guys in boondocks country. But I would at least like to organize and influence the political muscle that's there.

"How will we win? We're all struggling with that now. This is southern Ontario. This is cottage country. We're not talking about the Haliburton County of 50 years ago [when there was shaft mining for uranium.] How do you get government to recognize that?"

As big as the task ahead may seem, Young says the battle must be fought. "You can sit there and do nothing or try and raise your voice and dissent.

“Writing your MPP won’t do you any harm. If you don’t raise your voice they don’t know you care. You can’t afford to sit there and say nothing. You might as well put pen to paper. If enough people talk to their politicians about it, if enough of them get concerned, then hopefully you get some of them going into a caucus meeting and expressing their concern. That’s where a politician does a lot of work unseen by constituents.”

While Young is concentrating on getting the word out to cottage associations, there is also a group called Fight Against Uranium Everywhere, FUME. Meanwhile, Bancroft Uranium is staking a 35-hectare piece of its property. It will decide whether to continue with exploration if those drill samples prove there is enough uranium to make digging the mine worthwhile.