



The Picton Gazette



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Council rejects Picton BESS proposal

TOPICS: BESS County Of Prince Edward Week-4-2023



BESS DOWN UNDER-A sprawling BESS facility in Victoria, Australia, is comparable in size to the BESS proposed for County Road 5.

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Victory was had for those in opposition to the Picton Battery Energy Storage System (BESS) project proposed by Compass Energy when the proposal was denied by Prince Edward County Council during the January 10th council meeting. Numerous community members voiced concerns about this project, citing health and environmental concerns, among other issues.

The project was intended for County Road 5 in Sophiasburgh. During the meeting, Compass Energy President Jonathan Cheszes also spoke to the project.

Among those in opposition was Ross Gower, whose property borders the land proposed for the BESS project. Gower, a lawyer with expertise in administrative law, pointed out that the project does not confirm to the County's newly adopted Official Plan (OP).

The OP is a document used to guide growth and development in the municipality for the next several years.

“A resolution supporting this project is, I believe, not permitted under the County’s Official Plan,” stated Gower.

The crux of Gower’s argument hinges on the OP’s focus on protecting prime agricultural land, such as that on County Road 5.

He further offered that the County’s OP only allows a utility, such as a BESS facility, to be built on prime agricultural under a narrow set of circumstances-criteria which the proposal does not meet.

“While the OP contemplates the use of agricultural land for utilities, it does so under very narrow circumstances and at the same time provides additional protection for prime agricultural land,” Gower stated. “This project is proposed on prime agricultural land.”

He also noted that two of the four requirements that would allow prime agricultural land to be used for utilities have not been met. These include an identified need within the “planning horizon” and that the OP does not outline the need for energy storage, let alone the need to decommission prime agricultural land to allow for energy storage.

“I also note under section 3.4.8 that while utilities are generally permitted in all land use designations, they are required to service and promote new developments in appropriate locations,” said Gower. “The massive scale of this project is not required for any new or future development. But, this was never it’s purpose.”

Gower is careful to note the Independent Electrical Service Operator (IESO) has ranked 356 potential connection sites across Ontario and that 166 of those ranked higher than the Sophiasburgh site and 190 ranked equally.

“The province could exceed storage goals at preferred sites without any facility here,” he added. “The developers indicate the province is seeking a minimum of 1500 megawatts of storage. Based on those numbers, a 250 megawatt BESS would constitute 17 per cent of the entire provincial ask but the County represents only 0.2 per cent of the Ontario population.”

Sophiasburgh resident Meg Kerr also spoke against the Picton Bess project, noting “unacceptable risks” posed by the storage of lithium-ion batteries as evidenced by other such projects.

In her speech, Kerr drew upon the findings of Sandra Kennedy, who works for the Arizona Corporation Commission, Arizona’s utility regulator. Kennedy was tasked with investigating the safety of BESS tech following a string of incidents in that state.

“Kennedy said these types of lithium-ion batteries are not prudent and create unacceptable

risks,” Kerr stated.

Kerr added that the size of BESS facilities investigated by Kennedy were relatively small in comparison with that which is proposed in the County.

“Knowing now how easily a fire or explosion can occur at these relatively small facilities, a similar fire at a large facility would have severe and potentially catastrophic consequences,” said Kerr.

Kerr also commented that the explosive potential of a 250 megawatt facility would be equal to 215 tonnes of TNT. This is the same amount of TNT, stated Kerr, that precipitated the Halifax explosion.

“Kennedy recommended BESS facilities be built in isolation far from everything else. I couldn’t agree more yet here we are today entertaining a proposal for what would be one of the largest BESS facilities on the planet in one of the province’s most beloved tourist destinations close to dozens of residential homes,” Kerr concluded.

Ultimately, as with Gower, Kerr urged council to protect “what our OP deems worthy of protecting.”

Don Wilford spoke to council detailing the environmental devastation that would occur should a fire break out at a 250 megawatt BESS along with the immediate risk to the local population.

“Lithium-ion batteries are susceptible to fires. At the scale proposed, the fire would cause vast damage to wetlands, the toxic gas plume requiring evacuation of Picton only 5 km away and potential loss of firefighters’ lives,” Wilford stated.

Wilford placed emphasis on the size of the proposed facility.

“The scale of what is being proposed is truly immense. It’s the equivalent to a small modular nuclear reactor,” noted Wilford. “Ontario has no experience with 250 megawatt BESS facilities.”

Wilford also provided background information about Compass Energy. That company, he said, is owned by Irving, which in turn is a subsidiary of Icon Infrastructure, a financial investment firm based in the U.K.

“None of these companies have experience with battery storage,” said Wilford. “It appears Ontario is not only ignoring safer zinc battery tech but outsourcing a key component of its electricity infrastructure to financial companies that will outsource the tech to a systems integrator, which will, in turn, repackage lithium-ion units from major suppliers in China.”



Bill Roberts. (Jason Parks/Gazette Staff)

Still other residents voiced concerns about the developer’s transparency and integrity within the community.

“After probing during the information session, developers admitted there will be zero long term employment opportunities,” noted resident Ryan Fowler.

After listening to concerns of residents, the President of Compass Energy spoke to council, describing the issues from forward by community members as little more than conjecture.

“We are hearing a lot of concerns from community members, and it is conjecture, unfortunately, talking about catastrophes that don’t reflect the record of BESS operating in this province,” said Cheszes.

Though not speaking to the size of current BESS facilities in operation in this province, Cheszes did note Ontario has been operating these types of facilities since 2014 with “no fires, explosions, or toxic plumes.”

With an eye to other proposals in the works, Cheszes noted there will be much larger BESS

facilities in the province by the time the one proposed for the County would be built.

“The maximum size for these projects is 600 megawatts. We have proposed projects from 5-550 megawatts. So, this up to 250 megawatt project is not going to be the fourth or fifth biggest project by time it gets built,” he confirmed.

Municipalities that are supporting BESS facilities include Windsor, Leamington, and Chatham-Kent.

“We believe it’s safe and it’s clear the province does too,” Cheszes concluded.

Ameliasburgh Councillor Sam Grosso inquired as to whether the facility would place strain on the local electricity grid.

“No, because 250 megawatts was screened by the IESO,” replied Cheszes

Sophiasburgh Councillor Bill Roberts tabled an amendment to deny the request from Compass Energy, citing concerns from the community, including from the Prince Edward Federation of Agriculture.

“I’m opposed to the use of prime agricultural land for this purpose. I support the Prince Edward Federation of Agriculture in their opposition to non-agricultural development on prime farmland. I hear convincing and alerting information from the audience,” said Roberts.

Roberts also noted that with the equivalent of 319 acres of farm decommissioned in the County each day, he didn’t consider the proposition a “fair trade”.

“I find the potential fire and contamination risks compelling. Since 2017 there have been 50 such failures including five at large BESS installations. One in Australia required 150 firefighters and four days to extinguish,” decried Roberts. “I don’t get a sense the proponents have the experience to complete and operate such a giant BESS project. I was particularly struck by the IESO’s own connection site identification, wherein at least 166 sites were deemed preferable.”

Roberts amended motion was seconded by Hirsch and passed by council.

