

**Chief Robert Weistchee Presentation at the Public Hearing on the
proposed Rupert River Diversion**

Waskaganish, June 1, 2006

Opening remarks

Good evening Mr, Chairman. My name is Robert Weistchee, the Chief of Waskaganish First Nation.

Watchiya and welcome to all those who are present at these hearings. We hope you are enjoying your stay here and the generous hospitality of the people of Waskaganish.

I come to speak as the chief of the Cree nation of Waskaganish and I think it is important as a leader to listen to what people have to say before I speak.

Over the past three days, I have listened to the presentations that were made. I was especially impressed and touched by the presentation that was done by the Youth, on Tuesday and this afternoon. They were able to show their concerns about their future and their land and over this project. I also want to acknowledge all the elders who shared their experience and wisdom with us.

I also want to acknowledge the beautiful artworks that are hanging on the wall of this room. They were made by the children of our school and they show their attachment and connection to the Rupert River. They show us the beauty of the land and that they want to maintain the beauty of our lands. I hope, you will take that in consideration when you will make your recommendations on this project.

Finally, I want to talk about the Rupert River, that we call the Waskaganish Sibi, the Waskaganish people river. This is not only a mass of water rushing down but this river is at the heart of the Waskaganish Nation life and culture and it means and gives us a lot. It provides transportation, food, nourishments, it is a connection to our past and traditions and it brings peace love and beauty and restores our inner balance. Don't forget that when you sit down to write your report.

1. Consent and Ownership

First I want to speak about the position of my community about this project

As you have seen over these past few days throughout these consultations, some people feel very strongly against it, though some seem to accept it.

Some people feel that the project will go ahead no matter what they say and that this commission is only a big show because the decision has already been made. A big show by the government to appear that we are being heard, but who is listening?

Some people feel that if they oppose the project, Quebec will stop investing in the community which leave the Cree people poor when the money stops flowing.

I'm not questioning the Paix des braves and the referendum that were held at the time. However, on the issue of the Rupert diversion we did not achieve informed consent.

The community was consulted by way of a referendum on the Paix des Braves, a complex and multipurpose agreement on a new relations with the Québec and consent was given to the Paix des braves

However, the community of Waskaganish, the community who is going to lose its river, has never specifically given its consent to the Rupert Diversion. This needs to be addressed and resolved before this project can go forward.

I also want to address the question of the ownership of the project. When I speak of ownership, I don't speak in financial terms but in social terms. And it is clear that the community does not have a sense of ownership in this project.

The Rupert diversion is a project that was designed outside of the community to benefit Quebec society and the international energy markets. And this was rightly pointed out by Tyron Trapper, a young person who did a presentation this afternoon.

However, besides a few short-term jobs (200 jobs for all the Cree communities for 5 years as was pointed out the other night) and the development of new infrastructures (water plant, substation, transmission lines, access roads), the Rupert diversion project, as presented by the proponent, **will have little positive impact on Waskaganish and its peoples.**

The Rupert diversion will be a great loss for the community and the mitigations proposed by Hydro-Québec are by no means adequate.

In fact, mitigation measures are only one part of the acceptability of a project on Cree land; the other part is the consent and ownership of the development and in the case of the Rupert Diversion, these conditions are not yet present and this should be addressed properly before any decision can be made on this project. This lack of consent and acceptability will be at the root of many problems in the community. We know from the Chisasibi people and their experience with Hydro-project). In your report, you mention the social cohesion of the community and your assessment is that the project will only have positive impacts. I can tell you that the Rupert River diversion is a major project and a major threat to this community's social cohesion and well being because of the absence of consent and acceptability. My community is very divided and split on this issue. And

people are divided within themselves. There is much confusion about this issue and this has an effect on people's health and well-being.

2. Consultation process

Now I want to say a few words about the consultation process:

The consultation process has been problematic. Hydro-Québec has made a great effort to meet the tallyman impacted by the project and their families but has not addressed the community as a whole. There is little information on the project in the community, not because it's not available but because people don't want to know, don't want to speak about it, don't want to face it. This is another indication of the lack of consent.

The consultation has been under financed and rushed, like if the river was going to runaway. The amount given to my community to prepare for the Public Hearing were insufficient to really prepare them. Little expertise has been provided to the community. This doesn't allow for a meaningful participation to take place.

3. Some problems with the impact study

I'm not going to review the whole impact study, many people have presented their comments and there are many concerns, about the fish, the water quality, salt water intrusion, ice conditions, navigations, short term jobs, health, and various social impact. But right now, I will only point out some of its deficiencies.

Somewhere in the report you mention that the Cree can adapt. This is true, we have been adapting to our environment for thousands of years but the real question is not "Will we adapt?", but what will the cost of this adaptation be to our community? This was not addressed in the impact study.

We can already see the cost through the social problems present in the community: (drug and alcohol abuse and gaming addiction, self-destructive behavior, neglect and abuse). These problems are the cost of the adaptation that we are already paying and we expect these problems to rise sharply if the Rupert diversion goes ahead. Is it what we want?

How can you expect a project imposed from the outside to contribute to the well being of a community? The well being of the community is connected to its sense of pride and its ability to control its environment, the loss of the Rupert River can only contribute to a loss of pride and control, a feeling of helplessness. Do we want to inflict that on our community?

The Cree people are not like southern people. If you destroy our environment, we are not going to move to the other side of Hudson's Bay or to Labrador to find a pristine environment. We have been living in the Rupert Bay for thousands of year and we have nowhere else to go.

As it was mentioned by Dr. Billy Diamond, the proponent has also failed to address the community impacts. Hydro-Québec has chosen to address only the problems who have directly impacted Tallymen, but this is not enough, the impact is not limited to a few families, but to the whole community and this needs to be properly addressed before the project can go ahead. I've been told several times by Chisasibi chief, Abraham Rupert " if they do the Rupert diversion, you might as well kiss your geese goodbye"

This lack of consideration for the community impact goes against the accepted standard for Environmental impact assessments.

3. Sustainable development

I want to touch on the idea of sustainable development. The Waskaganish Sibi is at the heart of our environment, it is a means of transportation, a source of beauty and strength and the diversion is not a sustainable way to use the river.

The project will only create a few jobs for a few years, and what happens after? Are we going to keep diverting and damming all the rivers in Eeyou Istchee?

Will the canoe brigade take place? As COTA mentioned, the marketability of the Rupert River is already affected by the Rupert River diversion project you are proposing.

Dams and diversion are not a sustainable way to create energy because they create irreversible impact on the land, create a few jobs. They are an outdated technology and we need to look ahead and not repeat the mistakes from the past. What is going to happen to all those dams and reservoir when we will be able to use other sources of energies that are less destructive?

This river has a bigger potential for long term development than for this short term project.

First I want to talk about the historic value. Waskaganish or Rupert's house as it was called at one time, is among the first european settlements in Canada. It was for many years a major fur trade highway (Nemaska Brigade).

This river would have much more long-term value if we could give it a heritage status and protect it. It is an important part of the history of Canada, Quebec and the Cree and we need to look at this option seriously before we spoil it for ever.

In fact, this river deserves protection because of its national and historical importance. We can think of an UNESCO protection status.

There is a great potential for tourism. You have been at Smokey Hill yesterday; you've seen the power of the river. There is a potential for longer terms careers for the Cree of Waskaganish instead of those short terms jobs created by EM1a.

All this potential is going to be lost after the diversion. Who is going to come to visit a series of pond instead of a mighty northern river? Before we agree to this project we need to do a study of the potential for tourism.

We also need to look at other opportunity of energy production that could be less destructive, run of river dams, tidal power, solar and wind energy. These sources of energies would be sufficient to address the needs of the Crees and would create more development opportunities. Furthermore, if we implement energy efficiency, saving program etc. we may not need this diversion. Here again the proponent fails to address this issue.

Right now Quebec is proposing to divert our river and is bringing a new transmission line to the community to make the Cree pay for this electricity. Where is the benefit for the Cree peoples? So I ask why are we loosing our river. And then after we have to turn around and pay hydro when the power is connected to our home.

Conclusion

This issue has put the community under an heavy cloud, but we hope that the big storm we had on Tuesday, I hope that this storm has cleaned the mind of the commissioner and that you will make a wise recommendations to your respective governments.

The project, as presented by the proponent is not acceptable. It doesn't have the consent of the people of Waskaganish and they don't have a sense of ownership. That has to be addressed before any authorization can be issued.

We are open to discussion with the government of Quebec in order to set up a process to find an acceptable solution (other designs, other source of energy, co-management of the project) for the impacted communities, I'm thinking of Waskaganish, Nemaska and Mistissini.

I want to finish with this sentence: Let the river run free, this land is for our children!

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