

Alberta

BUFFALO LAKE

Lake scheme attacked as 'nonsense'

Project viewed as wasteful

RICHARD HELM
Journal Staff Writer

Alix

The Buffalo Lake stabilization plan was attacked as "economic nonsense" and an environmental enigma Wednesday by Alberta environmentalist Martha Kostuch.

Kostuch sent a chill through a second day of otherwise upbeat public hearings into the provincial government's \$13-million project, saying she has requested a federal environmental review of the river-diversion scheme to stabilize the lake's erratic water levels.

"It's clear for the people of Alberta, this project is a loser."

Her criticism of the government proposal, sent Tuesday to Ottawa, as well as critical remarks from a handful of other closing-day speakers, broke a long succession of supportive submissions from cottagers and officials from surrounding communities.

Proponents of the lake plan claimed a significant victory earlier in the day when a consulting economist acknowledged he had been mistaken in concluding that costs exceed the projects benefits by \$2 million.

Brent Friedenbergr, grilled a day earlier by a representative of lake-side cottagers, conceded he made a mistake in his methodology and that the benefits appear to exceed the \$13 million cost by some \$450,000, as the cottagers maintain.

Friedenberg said he was still sticking to his conclusion that current and future property owners at the lake will receive the greatest benefits from the project.

As the hearings concluded, the chairman of the government-appointed review panel pledged to have a final report in the hands of Environment Minister Ralph Klein by June 17. Don Thorne, a former Lacombe mayor, also publicly asserted his board's impartiality.

Peter Melnychuk, an assistant deputy minister with Alberta Environment, shrugged off the prospect of a federal environmental review. All the scientific documents concerning the project have been submitted to Ottawa and the province is awaiting the conclusion of that federal review, he said.

"Our judgment is that all of this project is within the provincial jurisdiction and we're proceeding on that basis.



Martha Kostuch

upgraded local creek to Buffalo Lake.

The lake level would be raised about half a metre, and mechanically controlled, and the diversion would also provide an assured water supply for the villages of Mirror and Alix.

A government-commissioned environmental impact assessment on the project concludes "there are no environmental parameters that indicate this project cannot proceed."

"The proposed water levels are within historical levels that the lake has already experienced," said Phil Ullman, senior partner in Environmental Management Associates.

He acknowledged his team's water quality conclusions differ from those of several past studies but said their work "recognizes the role of groundwater" and employs more comprehensive data by virtue of the sheer weight of the 29 preceding scientific studies on the project.

Kathie Hankins, a Stettler businesswoman, told the board she felt the environmental impact study has spent too much time on the Buffalo Lake phase of the project. The plan would have been more accurately named the Mirror-Alix domestic water supply project, she said.

"The level of the lake is only a spinoff of addressing the serious water supply problems of Alix and Mirror. A greater emphasis should have been placed on the other benefits."

As on Tuesday, a majority of the people who addressed the board or wrote the board supported the project.

But Kim Schmidt, a regional

impartiality.

Peter Melnychuk, an assistant deputy minister with Alberta Environment, shrugged off the prospect of a federal environmental review. All the scientific documents concerning the project have been submitted to Ottawa and the province is awaiting the conclusion of that federal review, he said.

"Our judgment is that all of this project is within the provincial jurisdiction and we're proceeding on that basis.

"However, if the federal government should conclude otherwise, then it will take whatever action that may be appropriate."

Kostuch disagreed, saying the environmental impact assessment document indicates the project affect navigable waters and fisheries, as well as migratory birds and endangered species — all areas of federal responsibility.

The project, under consideration in some form for the past 12 years, involves pumping water from the Red Deer River through pipeline and canal to Alix Lake and then through an

of the project. The plan would have been more accurately named the Mirror-Alix domestic water supply project, she said.

"The level of the lake is only a spinoff of addressing the serious water supply problems of Alix and Mirror. A greater emphasis should have been placed on the other benefits."

As on Tuesday, a majority of the people who addressed the board or wrote the board supported the project.

But Kim Schmidt, a regional manager with Ducks Unlimited, told the panel his organization wants more study into the effects it may have on one of the highest densities of breeding waterfowl in North America.

He said a specific plan is needed to ensure waterfowl and shorebird habitats are properly protected from the recreational use that is expected to expand if the project proceeds.

Kostuch also declared the government is hiding the true purpose of the project.

She maintains the project is simply part of the province's comprehensive plan for inter-basin transfer of water.

Audience at hearing liked upbeat report

RICHARD HELM
Journal Staff Writer

Alix

It began with a round of applause.

Any similarity the Buffalo Lake public hearings had with conventional environmental hearings ended early in the process when board chairman Don Thorne urged people packed into the community hall here to give a team of government bureaucrats a big hand.

The Alberta Environment officials had just finished a detailed and upbeat assessment of their plans to spend \$13 million on a river diversion scheme to stabilize water levels on a lake that claims Premier Don Getty as one of its most notable neighbors.

In theory, the environmental and cost-benefit merits of the Buffalo Lake proposal were still in dispute. In reality, the people who turned out at the public hearings that concluded Wednesday were so sold on the idea they didn't even bother posing questions.

All the unswerving optimism didn't seem to faze Thorne.

"You've been a wonderful audience," he said enthusiastically on several occasions.

At times Thorne even appeared to get swept up in the tide. Following a presentation Wednesday by the first speaker to openly oppose the project, 70-year-old Ken Hanson of Red

Deer, Thorne asked the crowd for questions "or even a statement of rebuttal." Two or three people complied.

Thorne, a Lacombe businessman charged with leading the review of the environmental impact assessment on the Parlbay Creek-Buffalo Lake Water Management Project, had said he planned to run things in an informal manner.

He repeated that pledge at the hearings, saying he relies on "common sense and practicality" in conducting such business.

When Environment Minister Ralph Klein appointed Thorne and two others to the review board in March, he acknowledged the Buffalo Lake stabilization plan would have been a good candidate for scrutiny by the Natural Resources Conservation Board. But that fledgling review body was not deemed ready to conduct such a probe.

Klein said the hearings would follow "as closely as possible" procedures used by the Natural Resources Conservation Board.

On Wednesday, Thorne confessed that he has no idea what that process might be. He said it had been left entirely to the board as to how the hearings would be conducted.

The other board members, Charles Weir and Ron Peiluck, sat silent throughout hearings, posing no questions to consultants or presenters except for a single question at the end.