

Americans want say in Shell Canada's refinery proposal

BY NICOLE GERRING • PORT HURON TIMES HERALD • MAY 18, 2008

Local environmental groups are asking the Canadian government to place Shell Canada's proposal for a new oil refinery in St. Clair Township, Ontario under the highest level of scrutiny.

The Binational Public Advisory Council plans to ask the federal Canadian government to require the proposal be put through a full-panel review comprised of American and Canadian stakeholders.

Shell Canada's proposed refinery will be about 1,700 feet across the river from East China Township and 2,740 feet across from St. John River District Hospital, according to the St. Clair Channelkeeper, a group concerned with water quality in the St. Clair River and area waterways.

The refinery would be the first built in North America since 1984. It would process 150,000 to 250,000 barrels of crude oil a day to meet increased demand for gasoline and other fuels in Ontario and Quebec, according to the company.

A team of experts hired by the company has been working on an environmental assessment of the project, according to a Shell Canada Web site.

Members of BPAC and Doug Martz, chairman of the Macomb County Water Quality Board and as the St. Clair Channelkeeper, said they want to ensure the company and government listen to the concerns of Michigan residents.

Martz said he is concerned because the draft environmental assessment report states the closest drinking water intake to the proposed refinery is 12 miles downstream at Walpole Island. This is inaccurate, he said, because it omits much closer intakes in East China Township, Marine City and Algonac.

"This project is heading for approval without review, planning and consultation with the people who live directly across the river in Michigan," said Martz.

He said that without American input, "we may end up dealing with additional air and water pollution and the on-going threats of spills and refinery malfunctions without anyone having listened to our concerns..."

Martz and BPAC are asking the Canadian government to include American experts, such as BPAC members, on the review panel. The deadline to send letters requesting the panel review is May 26.

"There are areas that we're concerned about," said Janice Littlefield, a member of BPAC. "We want to be on a panel that looks at them. And we want to know the process they're going to use."

For example, BPAC wants details on where the company may dredge to build its docking facility. In some areas of the river, toxic sediments have gathered that, if stirred up, could harm fish and other wildlife, Littlefield said.

Heather Cooper, a spokeswoman for Shell Canada, said people on the American side of the border have been given a chance to express their concerns.

There have been a series of public meetings in Canada that should have close enough to the border for Americans to attend, including at least one in Point Edward, she said. People are always welcome to call, write letters or send e-mail to Shell with their concerns, she said.

"There certainly has been an opportunity on both sides of the border," Cooper said. "We certainly continue" to welcome comments.

She said that although Shell has hired the people who are working on the environmental assessment, provincial and federal authorities will need to approve certain aspects of the project.

The environmental assessment will look at broad areas and will include impact on water and air on both sides of the border, she said.

The company must submit its final environmental assessment to the Ontario Ministry of the Environment by June 25. The Ministry is expected to reply to the assessment in early 2009.