

East side story a requiem?

By: Jim Collinson

Now that the election is over, perhaps some objective attention can finally be given to the proposed Bipole III line.

Despite much huffing and puffing from some environmental activists, no solid evidence has arisen to refute the economic, social and heritage advantages of combining a bipole line with a protected boreal region having UNESCO World Heritage potential on the east side of Lake Winnipeg. This would provide an optimum setting for jobs and economic development, options beyond just a few seasonal tourism positions for those who live in that area.

What's been missing is a willingness on the part of all interested parties to sit down together and work out how it can be done. Most grievously, there is at least an appearance that those committed to a life in that region have been left out of the debate. Initially, only one of the 10 (depending on where the line is drawn) communities opposed the line, and it's no longer clear that Poplar River continues to hold the same view.

So what's the problem? Clearly, the government of Manitoba is scared of something besides the facts. Enter the foreign eco-activists with their threatened bag of lawsuits. It has become clear, as a result of publicity during the recent election campaign, that activists who are not Canadian residents are trying to force their biases on Canada's and Manitoba's resource policies. After all, what have they got to lose? It's Manitobans who get hurt with the excessive costs of the alternate route, severe destructive impacts on migratory birds, and marginalized farmers. Never mind the high risk of damage due to the extra length and risky crossing of other major lines, and significant effects from stray currents and harmonics caused by the longer line sited through mining, industrial and agricultural areas.

What about the aboriginal communities within the east side? There are some 10,000 residents if all communities from Fort Alexander to the top of Lake Winnipeg are included. Of these, about 36.5 per cent are younger than 15, and more than 11 per cent are ages 16 to 19. Consequently, there will be about 2,500 additional entrants to the labour force over the next 10 years. Will this many new jobs be generated within a totally protected area? Tourist-related jobs don't pay all that much and are quite seasonal, so don't look there for much help. Bipole construction through a carefully selected route will be quite benign in terms of impact, will create jobs for local people during construction and concurrently develop marketable skills for the future. Just as farmers will be compensated for intrusions on their land, aboriginal people deserve consideration for a line passing through their traditional lands, so this compensation could be directed towards economic endeavours relevant to those affected.

Glib statements to the effect that Manitoba needs the line now are false. It has done very well without it for a long time, and there is no immediate need for additional capacity. Nothing will be lost by taking a year to carry out a careful and fresh analysis of the east-side option. So where does this lead? A west-side line benefits only the foreign eco-activists, who seem to have little sympathy for migratory birds, despite a century-old international convention for their management and protection. It increases costs to Manitoba taxpayers and means significantly increased deaths of migratory birds along the main Manitoba segment of the

Mississippi flyway. Most seriously, it eliminates the best potential social and economic development options available to the aboriginal people in the area.

Although the debt incurred is supposed to be paid back by export sales, that could be a tenuous assumption. Other markets may deserve consideration. Alberta oilsands development is looking to clean up emissions; perhaps the power could be used for the production of hydrogen rather than by stripping natural gas. Or maybe Saskatchewan might buy some to offset coal-fired generation. If, however, the market is in the U.S., how secure is it when the roots of the argument against the east-side line seem to be attached to activists there with expertise in using their own national feet for target practice?

Fear of lawsuits from foreign agencies is a weak excuse and a cop-out for not doing the right thing for Manitobans. The residents east of Lake Winnipeg deserve a chance to consider their options, as do Manitoba taxpayers. An all-or-nothing approach is not helpful when reasonable collaboration could be a win for the aboriginal people, a win for the boreal forest and a win for Manitoba taxpayers.

Taken in proper context, it could even be a win for those from outside Canada who believe (or at least say they believe) protected boreal forest is to the advantage of humanity. Just because the U.S. has devastated most of its boreal forest, along with a considerable number of coal-bearing mountains, is no reason to take out their frustrations on Canada. Manitoba needs a musical, not a requiem.

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Republished from the Winnipeg Free Press print edition October 24, 2011