

Soils study blasted for not being 'friendly' to public

By Carol Mulligan
THE SUDBURY STAR

If the public advisory committee for the Sudbury Soils Study wants to hear from "Joe Public," it's going to have to change its attitude, says a Sudbury labour activist.

"If they want the public to have input, they're making it very difficult," Homer Seguin said late last night, after a three-hour meeting of the committee at Cambrian College.

"They weren't very friendly to the public," added Seguin. "The whole system was very flawed."

Seguin, who worked for Inco and Falconbridge Ltd. for 50 years and was active in health and safety issues, wasn't on the agenda to speak at the meeting.

But when it started, he asked committee chairman Ivan Filion if he could present a letter on behalf of several trade unions in Sudbury.

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Seguin

Soils: want companies out

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The letter, signed by representatives from Steelworkers Local 6500, Mine Mill Local 598/CAW and office, clerical and technical unions for Inco and Falconbridge, was sent to Premier Ernie Eves and other provincial party leaders.

In it, they call for the immediate removal of Inco and Falconbridge as voting members of the soils study and ask that two union members be appointed in their place.

Seguin was given permission to speak, and read the letter to the committee and the 35 or 40 people audience members towards the end the evening.

Afterwards, committee member Norris Artuso began asking Seguin questions about the recent strike by 3,300 members of Steelworkers' Local 6500 at Inco.

Artuso told Seguin if union members could get by for 12 weeks without a salary, they could "have funded the study a long time ago."

The public advisory committee is a sub-committee of the Sudbury Soils Study, a three-year, \$5-million study to look at the presence of harmful heavy metals in Sudbury soils and the impact on human and environmental health.

The study has come under fire because it is being funded by Inco and Falconbridge, the mining companies that may be ordered to pay to clean up the soil if they are found to be contaminated.

Inco and Falconbridge officials sit on the technical committee, which is responsible for the study.

The public advisory committee is meant to advise the technical committee on public concerns related to the study and to communicate the work of the technical committee, which is done in private meetings, to citizens.

After the meeting, Seguin said he didn't mind being grilled by Artuso during the meeting.

But he said he didn't like having to "force" his way on to the agenda at what was supposed to be a public meeting.

He said he fears the average Sudburian won't be as aggressive as he was.

According the Sudbury Soils Study Web site, the SARA Group will be evaluating thousands of soil samples taken throughout the city, and comparing results with metal levels that would normally occur in soils of this type.

The group will examine the risks these contaminants may pose to the health of people or the environment, and then conduct an Ecological and Human Health Risk Assessment. Earlier in the meeting, Wren told the PAC and the audience about the checks and balances that are built into the Sudbury Soils Study.

At the end of the day, Wren said, they will ensure that the results of the study are credible. The date for the next meeting of the public advisory committee, which meets every two months, hasn't been set because of a conflict with a previously scheduled Sudbury Soils Study open house scheduled for Nov. 18 at Science North.

■ *Sudbury Soil Study should not become subject to industry-union antagonisms*

Protect the soil study

Eighteen months ago the Ontario Ministry of the Environment brought together officials at Inco Ltd., Falconbridge Ltd., the Sudbury and District Health Unit, the City of Greater Sudbury and the Health Canada, First Nations and Inuit health branch to join them in undertaking the Sudbury Soils Study. Together, the six formed a technical committee, and Inco and Falconbridge agreed to pay for the \$5-million study.

Unfortunately, the study has become a political football. Through the summer some individuals have argued that Inco and Falconbridge are in a conflict of interest by being on the technical committee. These critics suggest the nickel giants' interests would be best served if nothing was found to be wrong with area soils, and that company representatives might influence the technical committee to work toward that end.

This week, the leaders of the United Steelworkers of America Local 6500 and CAW Mine Mill and Smelter Workers Local 598 have joined in the chorus charging the companies with being in a conflict of interest. They have sent a letter to Premier Ernie Eves asking that the two companies' representatives be removed as voting members.

They also asked that representatives from the two unions be appointed to the committee to replace those from the companies.

The unions' requests are poorly conceived, poorly timed and even more poorly worded. First, so much work has already been completed. To raise these concerns about the companies now, 18 months and nearly halfway into the process, is more than late, it's delinquent.

Second, the companies will undoubtedly be expected to play a lead role in whatever remedies stem from the study, so it's only fair they be part of the process. We've already learned that levels of heavy metals in area soils are significant — in fact the companies' own soil surveys told us that, and that's what led to the creation of the Sudbury Soils Study.

What we don't know is what danger to the ecosystem and to human health this contaminated soil represents. Nor do we know how to remedy any dangers, or how much possible remedies might cost. We only know that Inco and Falconbridge will have to pay the tab when these things are known. If the companies are part of the problem, it's only fair they also be part of the solution.

Third, the unions' accusations are less insulting to the companies than to the complex web of checks and balances that has been built into the Sudbury Soils Study. This group is headed by biologist Franco Mariotti who as the process observer is the eyes and ears of the public's interest. Mariotti's credentials are impeccable, and there is no evidence whatsoever that the companies are even attempting, let alone succeeding, in influencing the study.

In the end, of course companies work to protect their interests. That's what successful organizations do, including labour unions. But to suggest to the premier that these companies are in a position to usurp the Sudbury Soils Study does nothing to improve the process so many Sudburians are counting on.

The unions are right about one thing, however. They can play a significant role in the Sudbury Soils Study. Mine Mill and the Steelworkers have a long and industrious history in occupational health and safety, and have a great deal to contribute. They should have been invited into the process in the first place, but they also should have offered their services before now.

But their involvement shouldn't come at the expense of Inco and Falconbridge. There's no room in the Sudbury Soils Study for labour-company antagonisms, and if that's what the unions want to bring to it, then their request should be rejected.

What do you think? Send us your opinion in a Letter to the Editor at 33 MacKenzie St., Sudbury, P3C 4Y1, or fax it to 674-6834 or email it to letters@thesudburystar.com