

EUB assaults our sovereignty

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Byline: Andrew Nikiforuk
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The EUB's decision to approve more sour gas wells -- the equivalent of a small dirty bomb -- on the city's doorstep demonstrates once again how thoroughly the oil and gas regulator has debased its mandate.

The go-ahead (albeit with caveats) could devalue millions of dollars worth of property, lower the city's tax base and place thousands of citizens in emergency response zones. In so doing, the EUB, a quasi-judicial body with the mind of a Soviet commissar, has launched an assault on the integrity and sovereignty of Calgary and its citizens.

The issue is not very complicated. Compton Petroleum, an aggressive gas producer, wants to drill more sour gas wells on existing leases and pretend the city isn't growing. The Alberta government, which has a pathological addiction to gas revenue, is a faithful cheerleader.

But most citizens and oil executives recognize that sour gas is such a potent neurotoxin that it can't be developed without putting neighbouring communities in emergency response zones. Over the past 30 years, sour gas leaks have killed more than 36 workers in Western Canada, according to Occupational Health and Safety records, displaced hundreds of rural residents, contaminated groundwater and poisoned thousands of cattle.

The city, the health region and citizen groups argued the expansion could potentially rob 250,000 people of a fundamental freedom: a secure home.

Compton argued that the risk of an accidental release was "between zero and the square root of zero," but company president Ernie Sapieha made it clear he wouldn't be caught downwind of the project. The board, which approves nearly 98 per cent of all oil and gas applications, feigned concern for the public interest, but its 46-page decision reads like bureaucratic drivel.

Most legal and professional groups actually reference their decisions. Not the EUB. This ruling comes with no footnotes, no bibliography and makes no reference to previous sour gas decisions, incidents or controversies. It fails to mention that the board's dithering on the issue goes as far back as 1981. A diligent board would have held industry to its

promise to deplete these sour reserves before the city sprawled over them.

The board says it would never approve a well that it believed was unsafe or "would result in undue risk to the public." But it told Wiebo Ludwig the same thing in 1993 and several months later a well leaked just 750 metres from his home. It told the Graff family in Vulcan not to worry in 1998 and they now have two adult children with neurological damage. In rural Alberta, where some citizens live in as many as 52 emergency response zones, the board has the credibility of the Alberta Securities Commission.

In its decision, the board boasted about "the infrequency of sour gas incidents in Alberta." But, the chronically understaffed agency does not report the frequency of sour gas releases or incidents in a transparent manner. (The province has refused to set up a registry of "gassed" citizens and workers since 1985.)

A cursory reading of rural and urban newspapers in the province shows that sour gas incidents happen routinely. With more than 1,800 sour well batteries, 15,000 kilometres of sour pipelines, 700 sour gas plants and thousands of wells, accidents and releases occur on a biweekly basis.

The board omits any mention of property devaluation. Yet, a 2003 EUB report documents that sour gas wells, just four kilometres away from a residence, have devalued property by five to 15 per cent in several municipalities ringing Calgary. So, too, have emergency response zones. Is it in the public interest to devalue property without compensation? Clearly, the EUB thinks so.

Jane Jacobs, the legendary intellectual, once wrote that great cities cultivated two types of systems: innovative traders and diligent guardians. Jacobs warned that whenever the guardians behaved like merchants, corruption and disaster followed.

A responsible regulator would have carefully laid out why urban growth and sour gas don't mix. It would have proposed a no-go zone and changes to the province's Soviet system of issuing drilling leases near cities, under watersheds and on top of signature landscapes. But it would take a real guardian with

courage and vision to do so.

Andrew Nikiforuk is the editor of The Land Advocate and author of Saboteurs: Wiebo Ludwig's War Against Big Oil.