5-Minute Speech for Hamilton Council

Honorable Mayor, Councillors and citizens of Hamilton. My name is Cathy Cottrell. I am a representative of the Society of Professional Engineers and Associates, a labour union that represents over 840 engineers and scientists who design Canadian power reactors and play a key role in their construction. Approximately 40 of our members live in the Hamilton area. I myself live in Ancaster and have lived in this area my entire life. We work for Atomic Energy of Canada Limited and our trademark product is the CANDU reactor. As a labour union we do not see eye to eye on many things with our employer. Indeed, our history is one of militancy. However, when it comes to our products, such as the CANDU reactor, we share common values, in particular our belief that nuclear power is safe, clean, economical, and good for the environment.

We are not aware of any plans to build a nuclear power plant in this area to replace the energy generated by the Nanticoke generating station, if or when it is shut down. Indeed, the government of Ontario have said that they have no plans to do so. We first became aware of the issue when a motion came before Hamilton council to ban the possibility of replacing the electricity generated by Nanticoke with nuclear power, in January of this year. Most of us were offended by the implications in the motion that nuclear power is bad for the environment and by some of the misinformation and fear mongering contained within the wording of the motion.

An example of this misinformation is the Greenpeace reference to cancers and deaths caused by the Chornobyl accident in the, then, Soviet Union, which attempts to scare councillors and residents of Hamilton into voting in favour of the motion. It should be pointed out that the Greenpeace claim is not supported by fact. A comprehensive study by the World Health Organization concluded that Greenpeace’s estimates were about 2000 % higher than the actual numbers. The World Health Organization has no tie to the nuclear industry and has nothing to gain or lose from stretching the truth. Using unsubstantiated data in an attempt to influence a vote does a disservice to the councillors and citizens of Hamilton alike.

Make no mistake! The Chernobyl accident was a terrible industrial accident. However, it resulted from using a flawed technology, unlike any used elsewhere in the world, with negligent operation and with a reactor that had no containment structure to capture radiation that could result from an accident. Unfortunately, it was an accident waiting to happen! Reactors like that are not built anymore and we have never built reactors like that in Canada. Canadian reactors have a proven record and have been safety operating for 40 years.

Canadian reactors, like others in the world, are designed with safety being the priority. They have multiple redundant safety features to ensure that the possibility of worst-case accidents is remote; one in a million or even less. However, as an engineer, I wear this ring on my pinky finger to remind me to be humble and that all people make mistakes. So reactors are designed so that even if the worst thing happens, any radiation from a potential accident is contained.

At my work, my specialty is environmental assessment. My job is to study the potential impacts on the environment of situating a nuclear power plant by considering the effects on
plant life, animal life, human life, water quality and socio-economic factors. We are obligated to study the impacts of any activity we undertake and explain transparently, in detail to our regulator and the public, what the potential impacts of these activities could be. As an expert in this area I can tell you that more than 99.9% of the radiation that the average person or animal or plant is exposed does not result from the operation of a nuclear power plant. It comes from natural sources, for example, radon captured in rocks, which is generally found in people’s homes, cosmic rays and medical procedures such as X-rays.

The benefits of nuclear technology are plentiful. The reactors used for power generation provide clean, safe, reliable, and sustainable energy for communities around the world. Their products assist in medical research and cancer treatment. The nuclear industry provides Canadians with highly skilled and technical jobs.

The city of Hamilton has had, within is midst, a nuclear research reactor at McMaster University for almost 50 years with no harmful impact on residents. Indeed, reactors such as the one at McMaster have allowed researchers to develop radiation treatment for fighting cancers and isotopes for use in nuclear medicine for diagnostics and for fighting things like bone cancer. It has helped McMaster University to grow one of the best nuclear engineering departments in North America. The message that the proposed ban on nuclear power in Hamilton would send to these students is: “We will provide you with a first-rate education but when you graduate we want you to get out of town”.

We are not here today to discuss whether or not it is a good idea to shut down the Nanticoke generating station or to try to clean it up and operate it further. However, if it is to be shutdown I fail to see how it would be in the best interests of Hamilton to simply shut the door to nuclear power - a proven, reliable, clean source of energy. I believe that the councillors should vote against this proposed motion and keep our options open.

I would like to thank the Mayor and councillors for allowing me this opportunity to make this presentation to you today.