

Three months after forestry report, nothing but silence and worrisome signals

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Halifax MP and former HRM city planner Andy Fillmore makes a compelling case (Oct. 19 opinion piece) for full and effective public involvement in major land-use and development decisions affecting our capital city and region. Fillmore asserts that “public engagement is not to be feared” and that “when done well, it’s the greatest guarantor of success.”

The same rationale applies to land and resource-use issues across Nova Scotia, and beyond.

A prime candidate for much-needed public engagement is the ongoing independent review of forest practices — the scope of which spans public and private forests, addresses Crown land management and encompasses inter-related environmental, social and economic dimensions.

Conducted by Prof. Bill Lahey, who in turn was supported by a team of expert advisers and received input from stakeholders and concerned citizens, the review produced 163 conclusions and 45 recommendations. The report was released publicly and submitted to government on Aug. 21.

Where public policy is involved, due process effectively serves both as the foundation upon which realistic and supportable options can be developed and the medium through which successful outcomes can most likely be achieved.

The forest practices review, born out of public controversy, was announced just three days prior to the 2017 provincial election call and lacked clarity of purpose and surety of commitment – other than necessity based on calculated political expediency.

Although presentations and submissions were received from interested parties who stepped forward (approximately 80 meetings were held and more than 250 written submissions were received), this input was made to and reviewed by Lahey and his advisers out of the public eye.

The report was written in the first person, which presumably was intended both to affirm acceptance of responsibility and to emphasize the independence of the process.

The net effect, however, is to underline the reality that the conclusions reached and recommendations advanced, despite having been informed by advice from multiple expert and informed sources, went forward to government untested by stakeholder review.

At the time of this writing, three months following receipt of the report, government has yet to respond.

Meanwhile, it is apparent that industry lobbyists have been busy behind the scenes. When a senior forestry official reportedly advised industry licencees operating on Crown land to conduct forestry planning in keeping with “the spirit of the (Lahey) review,” there was immediate pushback from both the minister of Lands and Forestry and the premier.

The messaging was that the Lahey report contains recommendations only, and that the forestry official’s guidelines did not represent government policy. This is not a good signal.

The July 2018 reorganization of government resulting in the renaming of the former natural resources department as the Department of Lands and Forestry, although separate from the forest practices review, nonetheless casts and ominous shadow over any expectations regarding substantive reform. The incongruity between this rebranding of the department and the ecological approach to forestry called for by Lahey suggests an ingrained intransigence, or at least a tone deafness, that is unlikely to be welcoming of recommendations for consequential change.

The paradigm shift needed in the way forestry is conducted and how Crown lands are managed is dependent on the full and effective engagement of committed stakeholders, and of concerned Nova Scotians generally.

The time is ripe for the Department of Lands and Forestry to provide leadership, by opening up the forest practices review to public discussion. There are a number of options that merit consideration, including but not limited to the following:

- Public comment on Lahey’s recommendations could be requested (although timing limits the appeal of this option, it remains viable).
- The department could release its proposed response to the Lahey report, and invite public comment.
- A more nuanced approach could include accepting priority recommendations (e.g. full implementation of endangered species legislation) to demonstrate good faith, while committing to further study or consultation where additional information is deemed necessary or issues remain unresolved or contentious.

If government fails to seize upon the opportunity to lead forestry reform and opts for a limited or muted response to Lahey’s recommendations, Nova Scotia’s forests will continue in decline, and consequent public criticism and controversy can only be expected to intensify.

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