

# St. Clair River Bi-National Public Advisory Council hears plans for hydrokinetic power facility

By AMY BIOLCHINI  
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Members of the public and the St. Clair River Bi-National Public Advisory Council heard plans Thursday night from a company proposing to put a hydrokinetic power facility in the St. Clair River.

Tim Smith, chief executive officer of Current Connection, LLC, in Troy kicked off the council's meeting at the Community Foundation Resource Center in Port Huron with his presentation of the company's proposed in-river turbine hydropower project.

"Our goal is to create jobs in the state of Michigan," Smith said.

The proposed farm would be 396 turbines -- capable of producing up to 20 megawatts of electricity -- placed in the river from the Blue Water Bridge stretching 300 yards south and 40 yards wide on the U.S. side, Smith said.

The turbines would not be hard-anchored to the riverbed but would float 10 feet off the bottom and would be installed about 30 feet off of the U.S. shore. Each turbine would be about 13 feet in diameter. Smith assured those at the meeting the turbine farm would be outside commercial shipping lanes.

Though there is no hard timeline for the project, Smith said there is progress being made in terms of impact studies on the environment and the river's headwaters.

Cathy Johnson and local diver Greg Lashbrook did the environmental impact study, and submitted it to the environmental engineering firm Tetra Tech for review.

"We did not draw any conclusions from our report -- we strictly provided from a consulting firm what is there," Johnson said, referring to staging and spawning grounds for sturgeon, shipwrecks, Native American structures, existing man-made structures and cross-currents.

Current Connection is in the process of developing underwater generators for the project with Smith's business connections in Australia, Smith said. Smith's primary business is his automotive parts manufacturing company, Osirius.

The turbine units would be made of carbon-reinforced, polypropylene plastic, Smith said.

Current Connection will not be asking for local, state, national or international funding for the project, Smith said.

Patty Troy, BPAC U.S. co-chairwoman, posed several questions to Smith about how the farm of hydro turbines would affect the environment and people as they jump off of the walkway at the Thomas Edison Parkway to swim in the St. Clair River.

Impact of the project on the sturgeon-spawning habitat under the Blue Water Bridge in the St. Clair River was a concern for many of the attendees at the meeting.

"We don't believe there is impact and if there is, and if we have to shut (the farm) down for a period of time to have no impact, we would," Smith said.

Fort Gratiot resident and commercial diver Brian Martin drilled Smith with questions about recreational divers exploring shipwreck sites in the St. Clair River with the installed facility.

Smith explained the area would be restricted from use by scuba divers, for safety reasons.

"With any change, there is some impact," Smith said.

Judy Ogden, first vice president of the Blue Water Sportfishing Association, said she was concerned about the impact of the hydro turbine farm on the recreational fishery, as many migrating fish species in addition to the sturgeon pass through the St. Clair River.

"This doesn't seem like a very good location," Ogden said. "It's such a narrow strait."

Many public attendees left the meeting after the presentation by Current Connection. Other items discussed during the BPAC meeting were an update on Michigan Sea Grant's habitat restoration project in the Middle Channel of the St. Clair River -- which will start late this year or early 2012. BPAC members also discussed removing an impairment on the river -- added costs to agriculture and industry because of years of pollution -- pending proper studies.

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