

Calmar residents want relocation fund set up

Would assist those moving away from abandoned gas wells

By Hanneke Brooymans, edmontonjournal.com January 22, 2011



Capital Excavating Ltd. works to disconnect the water and sewer lines on one of three homes in Calmar that are to be demolished by Imperial Oil.

Photograph by: Brian Gavriloff, edmontonjournal.com

EDMONTON — Calmar residents living near abandoned gas wells discovered in their midst have asked town council and Imperial Oil to set up a fund to relocate people who want to move.

They envision the fund being similar to the one set up in 2005 to relocate residents being hemmed in by chemical plants in the industrial heartland northeast of Edmonton, their lawyer Bill McElhanney said.

A legal representative of the residents made the suggestion to council earlier this week. Town public works director Ed Melesko said he's been asked not to provide any comment until they talk to their lawyer. Mayor Don Faulkner also did not respond to a request for comment.

McElhanney said the existence of oil wells and the stigma attached to them means it's arguable whether or not the market value of nearby homes can even be established. He estimates 40 residences are affected, and that maybe 12 or 13 households would potentially like to leave.

So far, Imperial Oil, which owns the wells, has purchased four homes closest to the sweet gas well in Evergreen Crescent. The company is still in negotiations with owners of a fifth home. The company needs to clear a space large enough to bring in a drilling rig and properly abandon the well, which means taking over these homes.

Altogether, Imperial had three abandoned wells leaking gas into the surrounding soil. The first leaking well was found by a developer who saw bubbles in a puddle near an elementary school in town. The wells were drilled and abandoned by Texaco in the 1950s and '60s. They became Imperial Oil's problem when the companies merged in 1989.

The company has said all three wells were leaking small quantities of sweet gas in the subsurface, but tests showed there were no health or safety risks to residents. The company put wellheads on all three of the wells, though, to contain them and has said there are currently no leaks. (A June 2010 e-mail obtained by residents shows an Energy Resources Conservation Board employee saying "there is still a very small leak." Board spokesman Bob Curran said there was some confusion at that point on whether or not there was a leak, but with a wellhead on that well it was not leaking.)

Imperial spokesman Pius Rolheiser said they've just become aware of the request to become involved in a relocation fund and they will assess and review it before providing a response.

In the industrial heartland program, six properties have been purchased so far, said Pamela Bunnin, program manager of the Alberta's Industrial Heartland Land Trust Society, in an e-mail. A third round of the program is currently underway. Bunnin said they are funded solely by industries and municipal partners located in the Heartland region.

Ralph Olson, who lives in Calmar near the Evergreen Crescent well, wants Imperial Oil, the town and the government of Alberta to contribute to the fund.

Jerry Ward, a spokesman for Alberta Municipal Affairs, said a formal request should be sent in by the citizens to the Treasury Board minister, who would look at it. Ward was careful to say that this did not amount to a commitment either way.

Olson is not optimistic any progress is being made.

“My impression is if we don’t take somebody to court nobody is going to talk to us,” he said. “They keep saying no comment. We’ve been trying for 2.5 years to get them to sit down and talk to us, at least the town anyway.”

Residents think the town has some responsibility because it allowed the subdivision to be built in the area, despite bulletins from the province warning them to look for records of abandoned wells.

Trevor Smith, owner of the fifth home, said in an e-mail the town has consistently refused responsibility regarding this matter, stating that it feels it performed its due diligence regarding subdivision approval, and insisting that the advisory bulletins sent to it by both Municipal Affairs and the ERCB were not legislated.

The provincial government is currently working on an amendment to the subdivision and development regulation that will require developers to check with the ERCB for the existence of abandoned oil and gas wells as part of a subdivision or development application.

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