



In the News

Alberta Finance Minister says mining proposal should wait

*Kelly Cryderman, Calgary Herald
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Alberta's finance minister has waded into the debate over a controversial magnetite mining development in a picturesque area in the Eastern Slopes, saying it shouldn't be allowed to go ahead before a government land plan is finalized.

"Until that plan is out, it would be premature to make a decision," said Ted Morton, speaking on the proposed Micrex mine in the Livingstone Range.

"If you look at the policy document for the land-use framework, it identifies the Eastern Slopes in terms of priority uses, as watershed and recreation -- not mining."

Morton is the former Sustainable Resource Development minister, the department now reviewing applications for the Micrex proposal. The avid hunter and outdoors-man introduced the land-use framework -- an overarching scheme to bring order to both development and environmental protection across the province -- in late 2008.

More than two years after the Stelmach government released its final land-use framework plan to the public, only some progress has been made in its implementation. Now, Morton says a final land plan for the South Saskatchewan Region -- which extends from north of Calgary to the U.S. border -- should be in place before developments such as the Micrex proposal are allowed in the Eastern Slopes.

"It would be premature to approve a project like this before the regional plan for the South Saskatchewan region is finalized," Morton said, noting he has hiked and hunted in the area.

That seemingly puts Morton at odds with current Sustainable Resource Development Minister Mel Knight, who has said development in the province must proceed even as details of the land-use plan are worked out.

"I'm not biased one side or the other in respect to this development or any other development," Knight said. "But what I will say is we cannot stop the development process . . . while we wait to do this planning process."

While the land plan for the South Saskatchewan region should be complete in about two years, Knight said plans for regions across the province won't be finalized until as late as 2017.

"It would be very unreasonable for people to think that we are going to sit and wait and not have any development until the plans are all complete," Knight said.

However, the minister said he would consider the recommendations of a South Saskatchewan regional advisory council when making a decision about Micrex in the months ahead.

All Knight would say about his fellow cabinet minister's assessment is Morton has a right to comment on issues he feels strongly about.

"I'm not always the most popular individual around either, but I take my responsibilities seriously and I'm not hindered by comments that other individuals make -- whether they're my cabinet colleagues or whoever they are," said Knight, who held the energy portfolio during the tumultuous provincial debate on oil and gas royalty rates.

Micrex Development Corp. is planning to mine magnetite, a heavy magnetic iron ore used for coal upgrading and steel production, from the base of a mountain located 11 kilometres north of Highway 3 and west of the Cowboy Trail, near the Crowsnest Pass.

Residents of the area argue the Livingstone Range is a rare intact example of Eastern Slopes splendour.

The immediate area is home to elk, bighorn sheep, mountain goats, and large numbers of moose and bears.

But the company said the plan has now been retooled to address many local concerns, including moving to a dry processing method to avoid using water, and relocating a processing plant.

The company says it will also monitor wildlife patterns and operate the mine for only three months out of each year.

Morton suggests the company's application may be subject to review by the province's Natural Resources Conservation Board, which reviews non-oil and gas natural resource development projects or any project referred to the board by cabinet.

Livingstone-Macleod MLA Evan Berger, whose riding includes the planned mining site, said he's been overwhelmed by messages from constituents who are opposed to the Micrex development.

Berger, who is also the parliamentary assistant for the department of Sustainable Resource Development, said the mining proposal must go through the appropriate channels -- but he will strive to represent the views of his constituents.

"It's different than opening something up in a disturbed area," Berger said.

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