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The high price of advocacy

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Protesters and placards make for good TV, but battling a multinational corporation and convincing government to take action takes professionalism, intelligence -- and money.

The evidence is in this week's astonishing decision by the provincial government to accede to the demands of a Flamborough group, called Friends of Rural Communities and the Environment, or FORCE, and stop a proposed quarry pit -- a massive 25-year gravel operation -- in Carlisle. It is also seen in the continuing fight by Oakville residents against a proposed gas-fired generating plant there, which they say is too close for safety to homes, schools and rail lines, and will worsen an already-polluted airshed. While they haven't yet won the fight, they've made politicians listen.

Both those battles have been waged by groups with deep pockets and a deeper well of professional expertise, from lawyers to business executives. Strategy, not histrionics, is what carries them. Involving local municipal governments and area elected representatives comes much easier to people who do that for a living.

Consider Flamborough's FORCE. There's nothing unsophisticated about this "rural community" group. It is led a former Microsoft international executive, the owner of an accounting firm, an environmental corporate consultant (who was also chief of staff to a former Ontario environment minister), a policy and strategy adviser who once worked for the premier, and a dedicated webmaster.

They went up against St. Marys Cement, which put six years and \$20 million into its proposal. The company clearly didn't expect to lose -- it never has before -- and didn't even co-operate with a provincial request for further water testing. But FORCE was, well, a force to be reckoned with. Area MPP Ted McMeekin praised it for being extraordinarily professional, informed and civil.

The issue, then, becomes whether the playing field puts poorer neighbourhoods and communities -- where lawyers may not live and residents can't fund expensive public-relations campaigns -- at risk of being subjected to unwelcome developments and proposals that richer and better-connected communities are able to push away.

The other issue is where will the gravel that Ontario uses, by the millions of tonnes each year, come from? Make no mistake: The FORCE victory is not good triumphing over bad. St. Marys, and the massive gravel industry, are meeting a real need. Ontario's infrastructure depends on it. The Escarpment is rich with it, but public opposition against quarrying there is growing.

McMeekin says he expects a broad review of provincial gravel-pit policy and where the stone can be taken. That won't be easy: For every protest about quarries near residential areas, there will be others about despoiling natural areas. Complicating the issue is that gravel is very expensive to transport any significant distance. New Ontario policy may have to contain some mitigation of those costs, or some other accommodation of the industry.

Stopping the St Marys quarry was the right decision for Flamborough and Hamilton. But the issues involved still leave the province between -- you'll have to pardon us here -- a rock and a hard place.

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