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Andy Wells says he was always against Muskrat Falls — privately

James McLeod (jmcleod@thetelegram.com) (mailto:jmcleod@thetelegram.com)

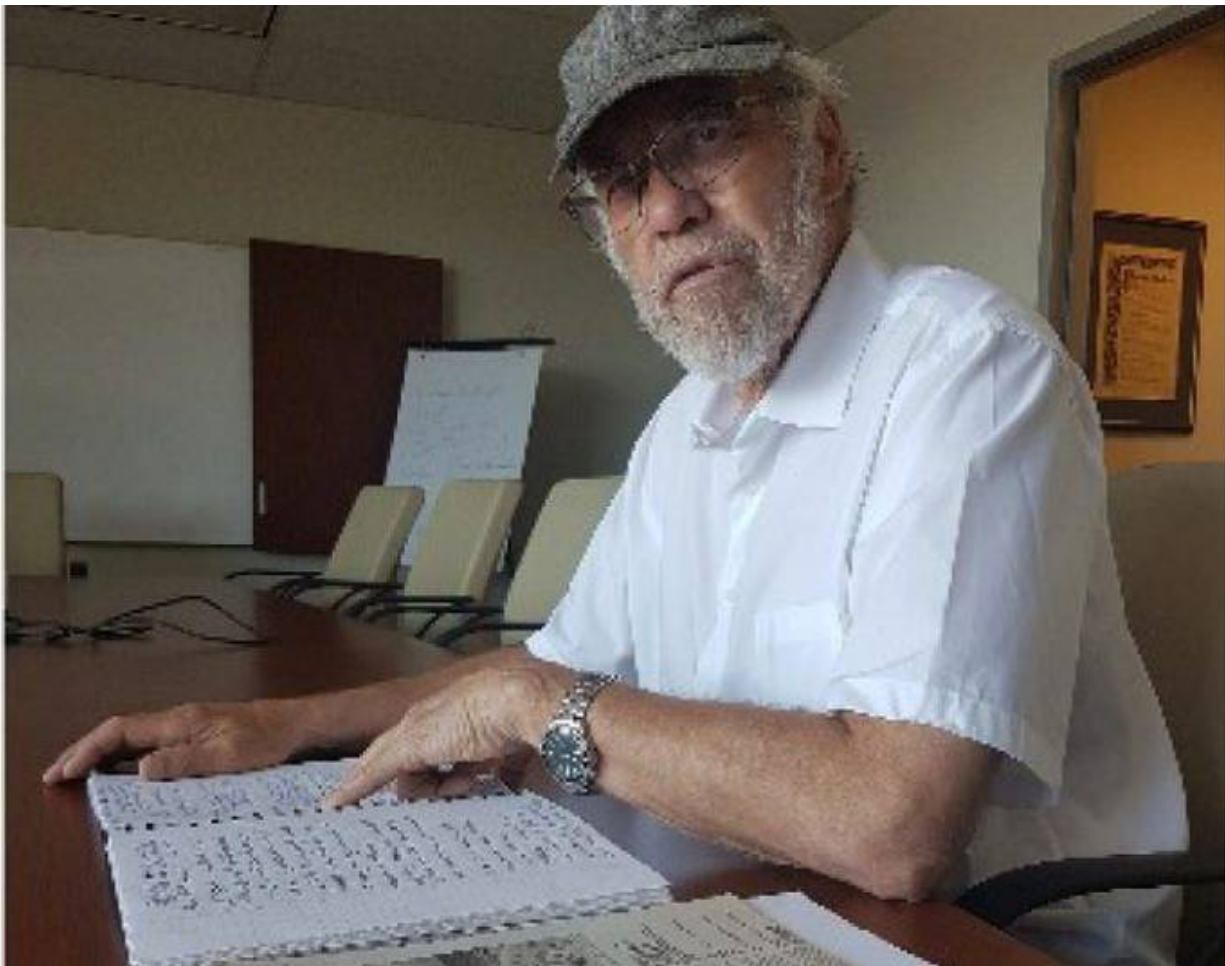
Published: Aug 19, 2017 at midnight

Updated: Sep 30, 2017 at 6:29 a.m.

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Andy Wells, former chairman of the Public Utilities Board and currently a candidate for St. John's mayor, says that at this point it's almost certainly too late to avoid an economic disaster for the province from the Muskrat Falls project. Wells said in his role as PUB chairman, he tried to warn people that it would be a problem back in 2011 and 2012.

Andy Wells wants people to know that he was against Muskrat Falls from the very beginning, and he tried to get the “soft fascist” provincial government to see the error of its ways before it was too late.

Two days after announcing that he was running for St. John’s mayor, Wells sat down with The Telegram for a lengthy interview, talking about his time as chairman of the Public Utilities Board during the critical years of 2011 and 2012 when the government charged the board with studying the massive Muskrat Falls hydroelectric project.

Publicly, the PUB said it didn’t have enough time or information to take a position on the two options presented to them — Muskrat Falls and an “isolated island” alternative. They didn’t endorse Muskrat Falls, but they didn’t condemn it either.

Privately, Wells now says he knew all along that it was going to be a disaster.

“From, I guess, the fall of 2011, I was telling people this is going to go to \$15 billion. I listened to engineers. I listened to people who studied this stuff.”

Wells said he couldn’t speak out though, because he was chair of the PUB and the government’s terms of reference didn’t allow the board to take a more forceful position.

When asked whether he could have gone beyond his mandate as PUB chairman if he was so certain the project would be an economic anchor for the province, Wells seemed legitimately surprised by the question.

“Should I have done more now? I don’t know. I mean, would it have made any difference? Well, I would have been unemployed, sure. But I don’t know whether it would have helped,” Wells said.

“I mean, I have a life, too. And I have responsibilities. And I had a job.”

The Telegram asked him whether this was potentially a calculated move to further his political ambitions, given that he’s speaking out just after he quit the PUB and announced that he’s running for mayor.

Wells seemed irritated by the suggestion.

“Coincidentally, yes, I’ve decided to resign and run (for mayor.) But it wasn’t planned,” Wells said. “There’s no malice here. I’m not trying to manipulate public opinion. But people should know what happened here.”

Wells described to The Telegram a series of encounters during the period when the PUB was studying the Muskrat Falls project.

He said that he was called to a meeting in fall 2011 with Robert Thompson, then the Clerk of the Executive — the province’s most senior bureaucrat. Wells said Thompson told him that the information the PUB was asking for from Nalcor was inappropriate.

In another conversation Wells said that he gave a warning to then-Finance minister Tom Marshall, in the late summer of 2011, saying that Muskrat Falls was going to go bad.

"Tom, if I were you I would not be singing the praises of Muskrat Falls. From what I have seen to date, it is looking to me like a disaster in the making. It doesn't look like a good idea," Wells recalls saying.

"He just looked at me and walked away."

Reached for comment, Marshall said he doesn't remember the specific conversation, but he occasionally bumped into Wells at the Churchill Square Tim Hortons in the morning back then.

Marshall said if the chairman of the PUB had raised concerns about Muskrat Falls, he would have taken them seriously and asked government officials to provide him with further information about the topics raised.

Then later, in February of 2012, Wells was called to a meeting with Charles Bown, a senior bureaucrat in the Department of Natural Resources at the time.

Wells said he reiterated that the PUB didn't have enough time to complete a full review of Muskrat Falls and that, based on what he knew at the time, he'd shut down Muskrat Falls then and there. That was the end of the meeting.

In a brief emailed statement, Natural Resources Minister Siobhan Coady said, "I have no knowledge of this conversation and the Department of Natural Resources has no record of it."

The PUB didn't get an extension on its work, and a month later, when the PUB report came out, it neither endorsed nor condemned the megaproject — originally forecast to cost \$6.2 billion, now expected to cost at least \$12.7 billion.

The Progressive Conservative government went on the attack, calling into question the PUB and critics of Muskrat Falls.

"On the floor of the House of Assembly they were jeered by members of the government. They were jeered and ridiculed because they had the temerity to show up in the House of Assembly and disagree with government policy?" Wells said. "I mean, to me that's rank intimidation. As I say, I was astounded."

jmcleod@thetelegram.com

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