

Conflict at protest



Sydney Mines resident Sheila MacDonald confronts the anti-strip mining protesters from Boularderie Island outside the Environment Department office in downtown Sydney on Thursday, calling them "cracked" for opposing a mine development near their homes. (Tera Camus / Cape Breton Bureau)

SYDNEY — A police van big enough to hold most of the protesters who showed up for an anti-strip mining rally in Sydney on Thursday managed to block the view of their intended audience — commuters on busy Charlotte Street.

Several Cape Breton Regional Police vehicles were parked at the site well in advance of the arrival of a dozen or so protesters for what had been expected to be a loud protest drawing hundreds of Boularderie Island residents.

The group Citizens Against Strip Mining has threatened civil unrest since the province Tuesday gave Pioneer Coal of Stellarton approval to start digging for coal on an 85-hectare site at the northern tip of Point Aconi.

"This is absolutely ridiculous!" Sierra Club spokesman Bruno Marcocchio shouted at police officers inside the van. "It's one thing to observe from a distance but you are actively obstructing this peaceful protest. . . . Who are you really working for?"

A short time later a resident of Sydney Mines, which is more than 10 kilometres from the approved mine site, jumped out of a car and confronted the protesters.

"I want you to learn the facts!" Sheila MacDonald shouted in the faces of several older women from Boularderie Island after explaining some people need coal to heat their homes and that the area could use the jobs created by the surface mine.

"The fact is the strip mining protesters are a bunch of quacks . . . this is a bunch of crap."

The protesters then tried to drown out Ms. MacDonald's voice by shouting "Stop strip mining! Stop strip mining!" At that point she walked away, yelling at protesters and reporters that "You're all cracked!" and pointing her finger at her head to illustrate where.

Residents have been fighting for more than two years to stop any more mining activity on Boularderie over fears of irreversible harm to water supplies, farms, wildlife and forests. They also worry there will be permanent harm to the island's tourism and fishing industries.

Cape Breton Regional Municipality has sent its own letters of protest to the province over strip mining.

The site behind the defunct Point Aconi mine is mostly wooded and opens to a beach where 300-million-year-old fossils have been recovered by a local museum. The woods also contain dozens of bootleg coal pits that have been dug for generations. Most are small but some of them are big enough to hold a small pickup truck.

Pioneer Coal is expected to begin mining to remove the shallow pits and will be allowed to go hundreds of feet deeper to extract 1.6 million tonnes of the richer coal seam below.

Local resident Donna Stubbart said a meeting is planned for Monday at 7 p.m. in the Millville Community Hall where Citizens Against Strip Mining will plan its next move.

The group has said blockades and civil disobedience are likely when Pioneer begins moving equipment to the site.

"We're still hoping there's something we can do," she said. "We'll have the public meeting ... and it's going to be up to the public now. Do you

want to pass your community over to strip mining or do you want to take a stand for the community? I'm not giving it up for anything."

The government's industrial approval for strip mining includes more than 50 conditions Pioneer must meet that focus on protecting drinking water, wildlife, esthetics, wetlands and homes.

Pioneer, headed by Antigonish businessman John Chisholm, must establish a community liaison committee before starting work and remediate the site when mining ends.

Previously remediated sites on the island continue to discharge toxic waste from strip mining activity.

(tcamus@herald.ca)