

# Changes coming to Chalk River “soon”

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Laurentian Hills Mayor Dick Rabishaw does not want residents taken unawares. Last week, he warned everyone that the changes to the operation of Atomic Energy of Canada Ltd (AECL) “are going to happen, and they are going to happen soon.”

For more than 50 years the federal government has been the owner of the Chalk River nuclear site, operating it under the umbrella of AECL, a federal Crown corporation.

Fresh from attending an AECL update for businesses and municipalities in Pembroke this month, Rabishaw said plans were well underway to turn the site over to private sector management.

“People really need to get their heads around this,” said Rabishaw. “It’s really going to happen.”

As a major employer in the area, the change is of great interest to local area municipalities and businesses.

Rabishaw said the event in Pembroke was very well attended. What they learned was an eye-opener for Rabishaw.

“AECL will still exist, but it will only have around 60 employees,” he said. “Everyone else will be employed by the new company or companies that come in to run the site.”

“One possibility is that there will be several companies. One company will look after waste management and another will look after transportation or engineering, and so on,” he said.

Rabishaw said it appeared the transferred employees would take any existing union contracts with them, but once the contracts expired, they would have to negotiate with the new company. Rabishaw pointed to the quick timelines involved.

“They want proposals by early next year and want to award the contract by 2015,” he said.

As for what the new company will be doing, Rabishaw said it was made very clear that, whatever else happens, the new company will not be continuing to produce molybdenum-99. Locally referred to as “Moly-99,” the radioactive isotope is used in cancer diagnosis. Chalk River’s NRU reactor once produced over 80% of the world’s supply of Moly-99. “They made it clear that future production was off the table, that’s over,” said Rabishaw.

Still, he predicted that there might be a role for reactor operations to continue. “The new company will have a mandate to do nuclear research, but it has to be on a cost recovery basis,” he said.

Responding to a question from Deputy Mayor Anne Giardini, who asked if the presentations had given him cause for concern for the future of Laurentian Hills, Rabishaw replied firmly, “I am still optimistic.”

“The government does not want the new company to fail, they believe the company can grow.

“There are some major players interested so I am still looking at this as a positive.”