



Farmer's Advocacy Office gets support from PRRD but waits for Ministry

The Farmer's Advocacy Office on 103 Ave. is open to landowners needing help with oil and gas issues.

Jill Earl photo

By Jill Earl

DAWSON CREEK - The Peace River Regional District voted unanimously to continue supporting the Farmer's Advocacy Office at their last meeting on Nov. 22, but support from the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Energy, Mines and Natural Resources is still needed to ensure the future of the Office.

Directors voted in favour of three recommendations brought forward by staff after a lengthy review of the Independent Land Information and Advocate Office (Farmer's Advocacy Office). The recommendations were to: continue the committed partnership with the involved ministries to provide the FAO and encourage those parties to also remain committed, include \$100,000 in the 2013 budget deliberations to match partnership funding supporting the office, and to work with the Province to provide the service over the next five years.

The PRRD will also need a financial commitment from the Province in order to continue the FAO, if no funding is offered the future of the service is uncertain.

The FAO is a pilot project that started in September 2010, with 50-50 financial funding from the PRRD and the Ministry of Energy, Mines and Natural Resources; both partners committed \$120,000. The pilot was scheduled to end February 2012 but it was extended another year to February 2013, it cost both parties \$80,000 to see the service prolonged.

Aspen Grove Property Services and New Harvest Media Inc. are together contracted to provide the FAO and its services to landowners. Anne Clayton of Aspen Grove Property Services, says that sometimes people are confused about the services the FAO provides and believe the office is related to agricultural problems.

The FAO's mandate is to provide up-to-date information related to oil and gas rights, roles and responsibilities; surface lease agreements and compensation; and the industry's regulatory environment. They also support landowners in their interactions with the oil and gas industry and host public information sessions and meetings. They are not to provide legal advice, act as a formal mediator, provide advice on non-oil and gas related sectors, nor provide advice outside of the North and South Peace regions.

Clayton says that many of their clients just need help dealing with compensation issues and negotiations or just need help understanding industry jargon and documents.

From September 2010 to July 2012 the FAO's boardroom has been booked 159 times for land agent and landowner meetings and 35 times for meetings and public presentations. In that same time frame, they have had 570 clients not including walk-in inquiries and have dealt with approximately 745 issues.

"They [landowners] don't have any choice about allowing oil and gas on their property so they need to protect their rights without having to necessarily hire a lawyer...so they want to make sure they are getting fair compensation for letting a well be drilled on their property on a facility built on their property or a pipeline through their property," Clayton said.

As the oil and gas industry is dominant in the area, the PRRD and the Ministry felt it was an important part of addressing local landowner issues arising from the industrial activity. Before the Office was created Clayton says that landowners had to rely on lawyers, neighbours or friends who have had previous experience dealing with industry issues and disputes.

"It wasn't like there was nothing, there was nothing really organized and I would say that a lot of the information they needed wasn't readily available to them," Clayton said about the resources available to landowners prior to the FAO's creation.

If the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Energy,

Mines and Natural Resources decide to commit \$50,000 to support the Office, a new public offering of the service contract will have to be put out to tender and a service delivery contract put in place before March 2013.