

City Joins Drilling Debate

Mayor Wants County To Think Again About Natural Gas Proposal

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By Jeremy Hunt

HARRISONBURG - The Harrisonburg City Council on Tuesday joined a growing number of groups raising concerns about a proposed natural gas operation in Rockingham County.

Mayor Kai Degner presented a resolution for council's review at its meeting Tuesday night outlining concerns about the process used to extract natural gas from the Marcellus Shale formation, and its potential environmental impact.

The resolution "urges" the county Board of Supervisors to deny a special-use permit request by a Houston energy company until the federal government completes a two-year review of the extraction process known as hydraulic fracturing, or hydrofracking.

"For me, I need new information to not be opposed to it," Degner said. "I've heard enough to be opposed to it."

Council did not take action on the resolution but members echoed Degner's concerns about potential effects on the city's water supply, as well as what the mayor described as the industrialization of the forest area where the proposed drilling would take place. Harrisonburg representatives on the city-county liaison committee plan to bring the issue up at their meeting on Friday.

Supervisors tabled a request in February by Carrizo (Marcellus) LLC for a permit to explore for natural gas in Bergton. If the permit is granted and the energy company finds ample gas, it would seek to construct wells to extract the gas using hydrofracking.

The request was tabled so county officials and staff could obtain more information about the proposal. Supervisor and board Chairman Pablo Cuevas, whose district contains the proposed well site in Bergton, said Tuesday the request would not come off the table at today's county meeting.

Conservationists, nearby landowners and the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries have expressed reservations and opposition to the proposal.

Numerous environmental problems have arisen in areas where hydraulic fracturing is already being used to harvest gas in the Marcellus area, a sedimentary formation that

underlies much of West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Ohio and New York. A small portion can be found in northwestern Virginia.

The Environmental Protection Agency, as Degner's resolution notes, recently began a two-year review of the hydrofracking technique to determine its environmental impact.

The extraction process involves pumping a mixture of water, sand and a small amount of chemicals into shale to break apart the formation, releasing the gas. One fracture treatment could use between 2 million and 9 million gallons of water, about 30 to 40 percent of which would return to the surface as wastewater.

The resolution says Carrizo's applications to the Virginia Department of Mines, Minerals and Energy and Rockingham County do not specify where the company would obtain the water it needs for hydrofracking or where it would dispose of the wastewater.

In previous interviews, Carrizo representatives said it would seek to buy water from a local municipal source and wastewater would be treated at a facility in Pennsylvania if it could not be done at a local treatment facility.

City Councilman Ted Byrd said council must get as much information as possible about the proposal.

Councilman David Wiens said he would vote in favor of the resolution if there's a threat to Harrisonburg's water supply.

Wiens suggested the city wait until the county makes a decision before voting on the resolution, but Degner said council shouldn't wait that long.

"We expect more questions to be answered before they vote," the mayor said.

Cuevas, who did not attend the council meeting, said Tuesday night that the city's concerns would be weighed along with other groups that have expressed opposition.

"I am very appreciative that the mayor has time to share his concern with us," Cuevas said. "However, in the over 25 years of public service working with this Board of Supervisors, I find our staff and the Board of Supervisors to be very capable of handling these issues in the appropriate manner."

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