

## **Drilling Proposal Hits Wall Rockingham Wants More Answers About Gas Well**

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By Jeremy Hunt

HARRISONBURG - A Houston energy company looking to drill for natural gas in Rockingham County has a lot to answer for if it wants the project to move forward.

A half-dozen people - including conservationists and a retired environmental engineer - raised concerns about potential environmental impacts of the proposal at a public hearing during Wednesday's Board of Supervisors meeting.

Following the hearing, the board tabled a special-use permit application by Carrizo (Marcellus) LLC to perform exploratory drilling in Bergton.

Board Chairman Pablo Cuevas said he would arrange a "get-together" with experts in the field, county staff and conservationists to gather as much information as possible before a decision is made.

Cuevas said Thursday that no meeting had been set to discuss the project.

"I think it's a good thing, but I think it needs to be looked at and the merits of it need to be checked out," said Cuevas, whose district includes the proposed well site. "If it's not [good for Rockingham County], we have to pass it up and move on."

Carrizo wants to drill for natural gas in the Marcellus Shale gas field, a sedimentary formation that underlies much of New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio and West Virginia.

A small portion of the Marcellus Shale is underneath northwestern Virginia.

Carrizo would use a technique called hydrofracking to break up the shale and release natural gas trapped inside. Hydrofracking involves high water pressure and a mixture of chemicals to break the rock apart.

If the request is approved and the company determines there is enough gas to warrant a permanent

operation, a new permit would not be required, according to the application.

The project would be regulated by the Virginia Department of Mines, Minerals and Energy.

In addition to speakers at Wednesday's hearing, the board and county staff also had questions regarding the proposal. Staff's biggest concern was the proposed well's location in the 100-year flood plain.

A company representative said Carrizo takes measures to prevent any environmental impact.

Board members questioned what the company's liability would be if a neighboring water source became contaminated by the well.

David Schnitz, a consultant with Carrizo, said the odds of that happening are "1 in 200,000."

"A lot of things would have to happen," he said.

David Asbury, director of the department of mines' gas and oil division, said that in such an instance, Carrizo would have to restore water quality to what it had been before contamination.

Malcolm Cameron, a retired environmental engineer with the Virginia Department of Transportation, pointed out that the special-use permit application does not disclose what types of chemicals would be used in the hydrofracking process.

"There's a lot of red flags I see," Cameron said, echoing a concern that board members and staff had.

Schnitz said the chemical composition varies from well to well, depending on what drillers run into.

"I can't tell you right now," he said.

Jeff Kelble, a "riverkeeper" for the environmental advocacy group Waterkeeper Alliance, wondered whether wastewater would be treated at local wastewater treatment facilities and if the plants could handle the chemicals.

"The potential impact from this exploration and drilling are long lasting," said Kelble, who advocates for clean water in the Shenandoah River watershed.

Other concerns of the board and residents include the proposed site's proximity to two streams; where water for drilling would come from; and emergency protocols should there be a fire or explosion at the site.

It's unclear when the board will take up the permit application for further discussion.

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