

SGEIS Flawed Says Lifton; DEC Needs More Information

by Sue Smith-Heavenrich

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On Thursday, May 26 the members of the NY Assembly Standing Committee in Environmental Conservation and the Assembly Standing Committee on Health plan to hold a public hearing focusing on health impacts of hydraulic fracturing techniques. The study released earlier this month by Duke researchers, coupled with the 10,000 gallon spill caused by a blowout during fracking of a Chesapeake well in Bradford County last month, underscore the need for more information.

Two weeks prior to the hearing, Ithaca-based assemblywoman Barbara Lifton asked Governor Andrew Cuomo to halt the Supplemental Generic Environmental Impact Statement (SGEIS) process to allow an opportunity to obtain that information.

“The SGEIS is flawed and inherently inadequate,” Lifton said. Too many critical issues including cumulative impacts, wastewater treatment and disposal, and health issues were excluded from the initial scoping document. “We need to fix it,” she said.

In her May 9 letter, Lifton asked the governor to “pause the process” and provide a 30-day comment period. That would allow the public a short window of opportunity to add information on a number of critical issues not included in the original document, Lifton says. Sixty-three Assembly members and Senators of both parties have signed, but so far no representatives from our area have added their signatures to the letter.

“Senator James Seward has called for the extension of comment periods in the past,” says Jeff Bishop, the senator’s communications director. Though Seward declined to comment directly to *Broader View Weekly*, his office explained that once the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) has finalized the SGEIS, the senator will “consider if enough time is being offered for property owners, experts and other concerned individuals to offer their thoughts”.

But Lifton can’t wait for DEC. “So much has happened in the three years since the SGEIS process began,” Lifton said. Referring to the recent series of articles in the New York Times she noted the need for increased state and federal oversight in wastewater disposal.

“We have much more research and scientific data on other issues as well,” Lifton said. She cited Cornell Professor Robert Howarth’s recently published study on greenhouse gas. “He shows that methane is a hundred times more potent than carbon dioxide and over the next 20 years will put more greenhouse gases into the atmosphere than burning coal,” Lifton said. The findings are important, she notes, because the industry continues to portray gas as a “clean” and “green” alternative to burning coal.

“It’s not!” Lifton exclaimed. “And we need further study.” New York, she pointed out, has a state climate change office. They must consider the entire lifecycle of a technology – something not done for gas drilling. “We need to make sure that the lifecycle emissions from unconventional drilling are properly included in the SGEIS,” Lifton said.

The industry also touts economic development as a positive benefit from unconventional drilling, but Lifton has her doubts. “When you look at Susan Christopherson’s research you see this isn’t true.” Christopherson compared the economies of five NY counties that had drilling with those that did not. Those with drilling fared worse – and that is with conventional drilling, Lifton pointed out. “We [legislators] hear lots of complaints from PA that local people aren’t getting the jobs; that out-of-state workers are coming in to do the work.”

Public health issues are totally ignored, too, says Lifton. “These are all things we talked about early on, things that were missing when the initial draft of the SGEIS came out.”

Lifton also noted the lack of discussion in the SGEIS regarding cumulative impacts – a point brought up in many critiques of the draft document. During the public hearings the DEC defended the SGEIS process, saying that cumulative impacts were not in the original scoping document and therefore could not be part of the SGEIS.

Flawed reasoning, says Lifton. “Our environmental law says that whenever you do an Environmental Impact Statement you *have to* talk about cumulative impacts. It’s supposed to be comprehensive!”

The initial scoping document ignored so many of these issues out of ignorance, not neglect, says Lifton. Three years ago nobody understood what high volume horizontal hydraulic fracturing was. But now that we know what we know, we can’t ignore it, she said.

“You can’t build a solid house on a shaky foundation. And that’s what we have right now with the current SGEIS process,” says Lifton. She worries that the document will continue to be involved in controversy. “We need to fix it now.”

As of press time Cuomo has not responded to Lifton’s request. But she feels that things are beginning to change in Albany. “The ‘drill, baby, drill’ fervor has dampened somewhat as people see the failure rates and spills, houses exploding, thousands of trucks clogging the roads and residents unable to get into their own driveways,” said Lifton. “Almost everyone I talk too has commented that it’s good we’re doing a careful review here.”