

Auburn No Longer Treating Drilling Wastewater

by Sue Smith-Heavenrich

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Last week the Auburn City Council voted 3-1 to stop taking drilling waste fluids at the publicly-owned wastewater treatment plant. For the past decade or more Auburn has padded the city budget with income derived from accepting drilling waste fluids. But no more. That leaves the city fathers wondering how to plug a \$600,000 hole in the budget – which would have been the anticipated revenue for accepting drilling waste fluids over the next twelve months.

The first hour of the July 7 city council meeting was given over to public comment. Residents shared their concerns about potential threats to water supplies, streams, plants and wildlife from the drilling waste. One person asked how the council could support a frack ban and then allow the wastewater treatment plant to accept frack waste.

The reason was money, says Terry Cuddy, who, with his wife Beth, helped to found the Cayuga Anti-Fracking Alliance. In April he and a handful of others founded the group and began investigating just how much drilling waste was going into their public treatment plant. From June 2009 to July 2010 the City of Auburn raked in \$900,000 for treatment of 16.5 million gallons of drilling waste fluids.

The waste fluids came from four drilling companies: Anschutz, Talisman (Fortuna), Southwest Energy Company and Chesapeake Energy. Except for Southwest, the drilling waste fluid came from Trenton-Black River and Queenston wells in NY. Southwest transported drilling waste from Bradford and Susquehanna Counties in PA.

Documents Cuddy obtained through a FOIL request include lab reports for tests done on the drilling waste fluids brought to the plant. Unfortunately, most of the drillers did not test their waste fluids for chlorides, sodium, total dissolved solids, barium or strontium. Also missing were some data for surfactants, gels and volatile organic chemicals – benzene, ethylbenzene, toluene and xylene.

“We were told that this stuff is OK, that it is from vertical wells,” Cuddy said. “But we realized that ‘vertical’ doesn’t necessarily mean ‘good’ drilling wastewater.” The Fortuna wells use fracturing chemicals, he pointed out. And one of the Chesapeake wells is drilled into Marcellus shale.

Cuddy’s biggest concern was that, should Auburn continue to accept drilling waste, the chemicals in the wastes might harm the wastewater treatment plant. “It’s also detrimental to those downstream,” he said, noting that PA no longer allows their plants to accept drilling wastewater.

More than 1300 people signed a petition asking the city to stop accepting drilling wastewater. During the public comments many people implored the council members to be responsible stewards of the city’s resources. “You need to make a statement that protecting the water is important for all citizens,” one said.

Walter Hang, owner of Ithaca-based Toxics Targeting, told the council that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has confirmed that drilling wastefluids do

indeed harm wastewater treatment plants. Not only that, many of the chemicals pass through the treatment plant undetected, especially dissolved solids such as barium.

When the resolution was finally brought to the floor for discussion, councilor Matthew Smith had a long list of questions for Vicky Murphy, director of municipal utilities. He particularly wanted to clarify that none of the drilling fluids came from Marcellus or Utica shale. He also wanted to note that so far the labs have not detected any hydrocarbons in the waste fluids.

“The plant is under capacity,” Smith said. “Our biggest loss will be the revenue.” He tried to table the resolution for a later meeting, but was voted down. When the resolution to ban drilling waste fluid from the wastewater treatment plant came to a vote, Smith’s was the single “Nay”.