

Schlumberger Woos Horseheads with Promises of Jobs

Residents concerned about environmental issues

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Schlumberger Technology Corporation, an international company that provides support services to the natural gas industry, is looking to put down roots in the Village of Horseheads. For the Texas-based company, the move makes sense because – given the interest in Marcellus Shale – this is where the action is.

Already Schlumberger has purchased 87 acres in the Horseheads Center Industrial Park, with plans to construct a 400,000 square foot facility that will house administrative offices and storage facilities for fracking chemicals and explosives. Construction will take anywhere from three to five years and, say Schlumberger officials, the site will bring some 300 – 400 jobs to the area.

Horseheads residents aren't opposed to the project, but at a July 9 public hearing several took the floor to share their concerns about dust, wear and tear on the roads, noise, storm-water runoff and truck traffic.

Schlumberger expects to supply equipment and chemicals for companies drilling gas wells within a 3-hour drive of Elmira as well as those further afield in Ohio, Pennsylvania and West Virginia. Even though drilling is a 24-hour-a-day job, Schlumberger feels they won't disrupt life in the surrounding neighborhood (between Ithaca Rd and the Ridge Road Elementary School).

Steve Boisvert, a consultant from Bergmann Associates, addressed the traffic issues. "The trucks will travel in convoys of 10 to 15 vehicles, from pick-up trucks to tractor-trailers. They will not travel through Hanover Square," Boisvert assured residents. He cited a NY Dept. of Transportation study from June that claims there will be "no significant impact" on local traffic.

"We've already got a dust problem," said Jack Nickerson who lives on Ithaca Road in that area. "It's so bad that we can't go out in our yards. Susan Multer, a resident on Watkins Road, wants Schlumberger officials to be more forthcoming about the number and size of trucks, as well as the frequency of trips.

"Usually hundreds of truck trips are needed to drill and frack a well," Multer said. Mike Swasta, who also lives on Watkins Road, feels traffic impacts have been given "short shrift" in the environmental review process. He also raised concerns about noise and the environmental impact of an increase in impervious surface at the site.

More pavement means less opportunity for water to be absorbed into the ground, Swasta said. "This means more storm-water runoff that could pollute the marsh and aquifer."

Glenn Harvey, a project manager from Bergmann Associates noted that the NY Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) has reviewed the facility's potential impact on local water sources and have approved the plans.

To ease residents' worries, Harvey explained how trucks are cleaned, fueled, and loaded for trips into the drilling fields. First, he emphasized, trucks are washed at the drill site (to get mud off). They will be washed again upon their return to the facility in Horseheads, and collected silts and solids will be carried away by a licensed hauler.

Clean trucks will be sent to a fueling facility – one designed to contain spills. Those needing service will be sent to the maintenance facility, otherwise the trucks wait until they are needed for a job. They they'll go to the chemical warehouse to be loaded and leave in convoys.

Chemicals will be stored separately and will not be mixed on site. As far as handling explosives, the facilities operators will follow all Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms regulations, as well as state rules for storage. Any radioactive materials (used in probes) will be stored as determined by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

Schlumberger is still completing the environmental review process, Swasta said, adding, "but it appears that construction has already begun." Noting that the site has been graded, with fencing erected and some silos and buildings on site, he said, "I wonder if the hearing process is a formality and the approval is a foregone conclusion."

After the laughter subsided Horseheads Village Attorney John Groff explained that written comments on the Schlumberger project will be accepted until Thursday, July 23. Comments should be addressed to the attention of the mayor or trustees and mailed to the Horseheads Village Hall, 202 S. Main St., Horseheads, NY 14845.