

Is Schlumberger Rushing the Review Process in Horseheads?

special to *BVW* by Helen Slottje, with Sue Smith-Heavenrich

Despite the incomplete status of their environmental review process, Schlumberger has already initiated work on site at Horseheads Center. Schlumberger, an oilfield, cementing, acidizing, and fracturing service company for the oil & gas industry, plans to stage its New York and Pennsylvania trucking and chemical operations in the Horseheads industrial park

As of last week Schlumberger has cleared the site, installed a fence and put up buildings and silos – even though the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA) specifically mandates that such work not start until the review process is complete. Residents observing the construction have asked whether approvals are a foregone conclusion.

On Tuesday, July 28, the Horseheads Village Planning Board met. Topping their list of concerns were the traffic study and the routes that Schlumberger's trucks would travel. The question is: has the village ever talked about whether the proposed facility is appropriate for the community?

Planning board minutes from previous meetings indicate that there has been no discussion yet about whether Schlumberger's chemical and trucking facility should even be located at the industrial park. A number of issues seem to have either been ignored or not adequately considered: the site is located over the Elmira aquifer; it is adjacent to recreational ball fields; it is across the street from an elementary school; and the development of the facility will likely require an access road to Route 13.

Under SEQRA, Horseheads Village is empowered to issue "findings" on whether the environmental impacts from this project are so significant that the project must be located away from a primary aquifer, schoolyard and the school bus route.

The village is still in the preliminary stage of the SEQR process and is currently reviewing the Environmental Assessment Form (EAF) that Schlumberger prepared. The purpose of the EAF is to help the village evaluate whether or not the project will have a significant adverse impact on the environment.

If the village finds that there is a possibility of a significant adverse impact, Schlumberger will have to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and undergo a more stringent environmental review. Indeed, Schlumberger could have provided an EIS instead of the EAF as a first step. However, in an effort to avoid preparing an EIS, Schlumberger has asked that the village issue a "Negative Declaration" and issue "findings" stating that there is not so much as a single significant adverse environmental impact from the proposed project.

As part of the review process, Schlumberger provided the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) with a copy of their EAF. The DEC, in a letter to Horseheads Village, noted that the proposed operations on the site had not been described in detail.

In fact, to really determine what Schlumberger is planning on doing requires a close reading of both the EAF and the Stormwater Pollution Protection Plan (SWPPP) documents collected in two thick binders sitting on the village manager's desk. One

document mentions a “slurry gel plant,” another mentions an “acid dock area”. Leaf through all and you find that they plan on a “cement plant” with a “dust collector,” a “stimulation warehouse,” a “fuel island,” a “perforation equipment building” where the explosives are stored and partially assembled, sacks and silos of chemicals, and “hazardous waste containers.”

Schlumberger plans to service wells within a 300-mile radius, sending out heavy trucks and pickup trucks loaded with fracking chemicals, explosives, and other materials as needed by drilling companies. A single convoy may require between 15 to 23 vehicles, everything from a couple of pickup trucks and 12 to 20 heavy trucks equivalent to 18 wheelers. Schlumberger has not specified how many vehicles will make up its Horseheads fleet, but the site plan review provides for up to 275 vehicle trips per hour and the plans show 323 parking spaces for drill site operations (primarily heavy trucks) and 98 spaces for staff and visitors.

The village planning board asked that the traffic study be revised to address site traffic during the morning and afternoon school hours and that this revision be presented at their August 11 meeting.

Meanwhile, Schlumberger has not disclosed which fracturing chemicals will be stored on site or in the tanks of its trucks. Given that much of the trucking activity will involve transporting fracking chemicals to well sites, it is sobering to learn from Schlumberger’s 2008 annual report that they have experienced a number of truck accidents, including 25 fatalities. This raises concerns about possible truck accidents and spills on Old Ithaca Road, Route 13 or other local roads, or even a collision with a school bus.

To get an idea of what chemicals Schlumberger is proposing, one must review their Stormwater Pollution Protection Plan. That lists materials that will be present on the site including: concrete, additives, waste, detergents, paints, solvents, acids, solid and construction wastes, soil stabilization additives, cleaning solvents, petroleum based products, pesticides, fertilizers, and sanitary wastes.

In their Spill Control and Prevention Plan, Schlumberger states that it is considered a generator of hazardous wastes. However they neither disclose nor address the composition of those wastes and how they intend to dispose of them.

The next Horseheads Village Planning Board meeting is scheduled for August 11 at 5:30pm at the Horseheads Village Hall and is open to the public. Community participation in the review process is vital and the Horseheads Board Of Trustees and the Mayor are very receptive to public input and comments.

Helen Slottj, an attorney from Ithaca, is a member of Broader View’s “citizen reporting network”. She read through Schlumberger’s EAF and SWPPP for this report.