

Community Gas Forum Emphasizes Working Together

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The August 20 forum hosted by Citizens Energy Alliance at the Spencer Grange focused on ways that the community might benefit from the gas exploration happening in the region. The public forum drew people who have existing leases on their property as well as those without. A few landowners spoke about some of the problems they've faced living with well drilling and production on their land.

Many people expressed concern about the fracking process that will be used in horizontal drilling in the Marcellus Shale. Once the initial fracking is done, the gas company may come back and re-frack. A Marcellus wellhead is an ongoing industrial site, one person said. They never stop fracking.

Carrie Kerr, one of the moderators, noted her concern about the volume of water that will be used in the process as well as the issue of safeguarding drinking water. "They are different, but related concerns," she said. The important issue is understanding the total impact of the resource extraction on the aquifer.

"These energy people from Texas come up here and see a lot of surface water," said one landowner. "They wonder why we're worried." He noted that at another meeting he attended, a gas company representative said that in 30 years he'd expect there to be four to eight wells per square mile in this area.

"We need to work together to protect our resources," said Janet Sherman. She was particularly concerned about how to protect land and water on property already leased and property on which other wells were already operating.

Another concern discussed is the need for gathering pipelines that will transport extracted gas to the Millennium pipeline. People who have not yet leased may wish to reserve pipeline rights for separate negotiations, Kerr said.

One community member mentioned that energy exploration companies are exempted from major environmental statutes intended to protect human health. These include the Safe Drinking Water Act, the Clean Water Act, and the Clean Air Act.

"How can we keep the federal government from usurping our community rights?" she asked. "Can we use landowner groups to lobby for the regulations we need?"

The second half of the meeting turned from protecting the community's environment to protecting the community itself. Rusty Keeler, a co-moderator of the forum, posed the question: How do we make sure the community as a whole benefits from resources that are extracted?

“The problem,” he said, “is that communities become accustomed to the influx of money from drilling and royalties. But what happens when that source of money dries up?” One concern was how to buffer property taxes that, given a gas boom, are sure to rise. Everyone, whether they benefit from a lease or not, will face rising taxes. Just as important, are questions surrounding how the industrial well sites will be treated by the towns; how they will be assessed and taxed.

“Communities may want to look at how they might capture the gas for use to power homes, street lights, businesses,” said Barbara Abbott King, candidate for NY Assembly District 123.

Forum participants agreed that communities would benefit from developing a comprehensive town plan. A number of ideas were suggested including: health care coverage, an escrow fund that benefits the schools, recreation for youth and seniors, and development of sustainable energy resources for the area.

The question is what do people want? According to Keeler, Spencer has completed surveys on youth and senior citizens. “We need things that will benefit everyone,” he pointed out.

The Citizens Energy Alliance meets on a monthly basis at the Spencer Grange to discuss a wide range of topics related to oil and gas leases. To join the “Gas Talk” e-mail discussion group, send a blank e-mail to citizensenergyalliance-subscribe@yahoogroups.com. For more information call 607-589-7887.