

Underground Injection Well Topic of Van Etten Meeting

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“Don’t turn our town into a toxic waste dump!” That was the sentiment of many of the 45 or so people who showed up at the community meeting at the Van Etten Elementary School on December 3. Three television networks were also on hand.

The Van Etten Town Board, who hosted the meeting, invited Sperry Navone and Jack Ossont to address questions about underground injection wells, and specifically the injectivity testing at the Mallula well. Navone is the chief of staff for Senator George Winner (53rd district). Ossont is a co-founder of NY Democracy School and helps educate municipalities about their right to protect their health and safety under Article 9 of the NYS Constitution.

Unfortunately, neither speaker seemed well prepared to answer some of the more technical questions put to them. People in the audience seemed better informed, quipped one attendee. Still, Councilman Joe St. Angelo managed to keep the lively discussion civil, only stopping twice to remind people to stay on topic.

Navone, speaking for Winner, promised, “If anything is spilled, we will make sure it gets cleaned up.” This riled at least one person who responded that Senator Winner was pushing the DEC to speed up the review process for the Supplementary GEIS.

“What if we don’t want to wait for spills to damage our drinking water?” asked another. He wanted to know what specific actions residents could take to protect their local communities against the chance of chemical spills of brine and produced water.

Navone replied that the companies should be monitored to assure that they are following EPA and state guidelines. “It’s not fair to ask a company to stop before they even begin,” he said, referring to the testing of the Mallula well. This was not reassuring to those folks espousing a precautionary principle when dealing with potentially toxic chemicals.

Noting that there are many dry wells in the community that could become underground injection sites, one individual voiced concerns about Van Etten and Spencer becoming a repository for toxins. “Where is the brine coming from?” asked another resident. “Did they test for radon or radiation?” asked a third individual.

“I’m not an expert so I can’t say whether what they are putting in is toxic waste or not,” Navone said. “DEC says that there are no adverse chemicals being put in.” Navone admitted that someone from the DEC would be better suited to answering the concerns people were raising.

“But there is a real need for the community to know what’s in the brine and where it is coming from,” Ossont pointed out.

When asked whether technology exists to remove the chemicals in brine and frack water, Ossont noted that the lack of knowledge about what chemicals are present in the wastewater is one of the major issues.

“With the [injectivity] testing we know that it’s a brine coming from an established well,” Ossont said. “We know what it is. But as for a future repository for wastewater – we don’t know what will be in that.” He brought up Dr. Theo Colborn’s work, noting that of the 200 or more chemicals used to drill and frack wells, over 90 percent affect human health.

Questioning the idea of underground injection wells, one person urged that an independent hydrologist be consulted to evaluate the dangers of migration and seepage of chemicals into the aquifer. “There is not a treatment facility for Marcellus wastewater in this area,” he explained. “And the recent problem with excessive dissolved solids has closed off treatment plants in Pennsylvania. I expect they [industry] are desperate to find a solution.”

Eventually conversation centered on the question of how a community can protect the health, safety and property of the citizens. Can we pass a law, someone wondered?

“Pennsylvania communities have passed laws to prevent spreading of toxic sludge on their farmland,” Ossont said. He advised the members of the community to begin talking with neighbors.

“Right now the issue is fracturing communities,” Ossont said. “There are landowners with economic interests and people without land who have other issues. You have to get the people who are gaining economically to see that there is more to their community than just the economic interest.” He listed quality of life issues – clean water, clear air, the rural landscape.

One issue that both the Van Etten Town Board and residents could agree on is the need for companies to notify the town before conducting activity. Navone seemed surprised to learn that Fortuna had notified the town council of the Mallula well tests only after DEC granted the permit.

“They’re required to notify us of the location of drilling sites prior to commencement of operations, too,” said Councilman Harold Shoemaker. He allowed that, for all his years on the board, Fortuna has never notified the town about ongoing drilling operations. In a rare moment of consensus, townspeople and Navone agreed that this might be something Winner’s office could address.