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Jobs-killing pander

By ABBY WISSE SCHACHTER

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City polls are raising alarms about a supposed menace to the city's water supply from the natural-gas extraction method of "fracking" in western New York. It seems winning points with environmental lobbyists is more important to them than the "jobs, jobs, jobs" that Gov. Cuomo stressed in his inaugural address.

Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver raised the issue at Wednesday's State of the State ceremonies. City Council Speaker Christine Quinn wrote *The Wall Street Journal* last month (along with James Gennaro, who chairs the council's Environmental Protection Committee) to attack the idea.

And Mayor Bloomberg said last year, "Drilling in areas that supply more than 1 billion gallons of drinking water a day for more than 9 million New Yorkers is simply a chance we cannot take."

They're all pandering to anti-development radicals at groups like Riverkeeper -- which has a snappy slogan for its Web site ("don'tfrackwithny.com") but little evidence of a real threat.

"Fracking" -- hydraulic fracturing -- involves the use of vertical and horizontal wells to pump thousands of gallons of water and chemicals at high volume and pressure deep below the surface to "fracture" the earth and release natural gas. The critics say this *may* contaminate underground water sources -- specifically the watershed that supplies much of the city's water.

The green lobby has already gotten the state Department of Environmental Conservation to declare that any company wanting to frack in the key areas will have to submit separate environmental-impact statements for every proposed well -- a paperwork burden that would kill drilling efforts.

But the effect of fracking on water supplies is an open question. While some environmentalists claim the practice can poison well water, the Environmental Protection Agency found in 2004 that it "poses minimal threat" to underground water sources. (The EPA is set to produce an updated study next year.)

What makes the critics' claims hyperbolic is the suggestion of some immediate threat to the purity of New York City's water.

For starters, we're talking about drilling in New York's piece of the Marcellus Shale, a vast deposit of natural gas that also runs through Pennsylvania and Ohio and into West Virginia. That's west of Broome County and of the Delaware and Catskill river basins, which provide the city with much of its water. In other words, the state could ban fracking anywhere in the city's watershed and still allow ample exploitation. There's no call for a wider ban, but that's what the critics want.

Meanwhile, New York is losing out to neighboring Pennsylvania, where fracking in 2009 produced 44,000 jobs and added \$4 billion to the state's economy, according to a Penn State University study -- and is estimated to add another \$1.8 billion in local and state tax revenue for 2010 and 2011, more than 88,000 jobs in 2010 and 111,000 jobs in 2011.

John Conrad, the president of the consulting firm Conrad Geoscience, has been in business in New York since 1989 but told me, sadly, "I'm putting Pennsylvanians to work instead of New Yorkers."

Meanwhile, New York has a fracking moratorium in place until at least July.

Quinn says New York can take all the time it wants to get gas drilling right; she's sadly mistaken.

Two years ago, gas companies approached western New York landowners and signed five-year leases with permission to drill. Even if the moratorium is lifted this year, many of those leases may expire before any gas extraction can begin. It takes time to drill the wells and build the vital infrastructure, such as water-reprocessing and recycling facilities.

With no guarantee that Albany will ultimately approve drilling in the Marcellus, how many firms will renew those leases? New York has simply been too hostile an environment.

One more thing: For all their worry about the city's water needs, Bloomberg, Quinn and Silver might think about our *energy* needs, too. Spectra Energy Corp just filed a request to expand its pipeline, which delivers natural gas from around the country and Canada to serve customers in New York City. Wouldn't it help the state's economy to use our own gas resources?

*Abby Wisse Schachter is editor of the political blog Capitol Punishment (nypostcom/blogs/capitol).
awschachter@nypost.com*

