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Lebanon landowners vow to work together in fight against natural gas developer

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Nelson Wedge walks past the Norse Energy gas well (at far left) and compressor (right) on his dairy farm in Lebanon, Madison Co. He had an arrangement to receive free natural gas as part of a lease with Norse Energy and a recent letter says it's being discontinued. A group of Madison County landowners met Wednesday evening and decided to work together to fight the natural gas developer. David Lassman / The Post-Standard

A group of Madison County landowners decided to work together to fight the natural gas developer that unexpectedly changed the terms of leases that provided free gas from wells drilled on their land.

More than 50 concerned citizens crowded into the Lebanon municipal offices Wednesday night, where charges of threats to turn off wells, allegations of forged documents and other personal accounts of deceptive business practices flew during the two-hour meeting.

At least 17 landowners received letters from Norse Energy last month informing them of its decision to terminate a provision in their contracts that allowed lease holders to use the natural gas from

company wells to heat their homes and barns.

Norse officials attributed the change to liability and safety concerns, although the leases clearly place the risk on the landowner. The developer promised to replace the free gas with a payment and make arrangements to convert heating systems to propane.

Effectuated landowners convened Wednesday night to discuss how to respond, weighing options from taking no action to seeking a restraining order.

Representatives from Norse told the crowd that they were not planning on turning off anyone's heating source while the matter was being negotiated.

In the end, the group decided to work collectively.

"You won't be fighting each other," said attorney Jane Welsh, who facilitated Wednesday's meeting. "You'll be standing firm against something that affects us all."

"Right now, all the proposals are coming from Norse," she continued. "Maybe it is time that we make a few proposals of our own."

The controversy over the contract change is one of many issues driving citizens to band together to negotiate with natural gas companies interested in exploring and drilling on their land.

Resident Mike Khoury said neighbors should have joined forces years ago.

"Anybody that tries to go it alone is a dead man walking," Khoury said .

"I think if we don't go at this as a group, certain people are going to get taken advantage of," echoed neighbor Jeff Eaves.

Residents also questioned the company's explanation that the move was motivated by safety concerns.

"They've been heating wells in Lebanon for 50 years," Khoury said. "Why all of a sudden is the makeup of the gas dangerous?"

"If there's no sense of urgency, we should really take our time," he continued. "There are unintended consequences every time you sign something."

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