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Pa. trip offers locals food for thought

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A trip to northeastern Pennsylvania to examine the effects of gas drilling provided food for thought for about 30 people from Otsego County, but did little to change anyone's mind.

Organized by the Otsego County Natural Gas Advisory Committee, the bus trip included county board members, town officials from Butternuts, New Lisbon and Roseboom, and a few interested citizens.

Committee chairman James Powers called the trip "very productive." Powers announced the trip in March, suggesting that the committee should see natural gas drilling firsthand. Powers represents Butternuts on the Otsego County Board of Representatives.

"We are doing the right thing and being proactive," in examining the issues for the county. He was glad those examining the pros and cons want to see it done right. "There is tremendous potential but it has to be done correctly," he said.

There is a moratorium on such activity in New York while the state Department of Environmental Conservation reviews its rules on the matter. A revised draft could be issued next month.

The tour began at the Springville Town Hall, where several town officials and two landowners gave a generally positive view of their experiences.

The site was near Dimock, where problems in drilling a few years ago were well-publicized. The group also made two stops in nearby Bradford County. Wyalusing Town Supervisor Marvin Meeter said gas drilling was a "complex" issue, adding that his experience has been that the companies will fix problems, including roads, if contacted.

"We rely a lot on them (gas companies) wanting to be a good neighbor," he said. If not, public opinion will turn against their efforts in other areas. "I don't think they can afford it," he said.

According to Meeter, the royalties and other money brought into the area have solved a lot of financial problems, but he said he is concerned about what will happen in 10 to 15 years when the gas companies move out. Meeter highlighted zoning as one way to "protect what's important" in communities where gas drilling is ongoing or imminent.

Joe Shervinski told the group that when he leased his land, he mistakenly expected the companies to "get it right," which he said hasn't been the case. Shervinski said the impacts of gas drilling can be seen on the landscape in many ways, including blue smog in the valley near where he lives.

Shervinski said as many as 100 wells in the state were polluted, but others present disputed that figure.

At the final stop, the group met with several Bradford County officials. This included Commissioner Mark Smith, Mike Lovegreen from the Soil and Water Conservation District, and others. This group also talked about pluses and minuses of drilling, and discussed such issues as taxation and zoning.

Powers said the county needs to take at least two more trips, possibly to Madison and Cortland counties, to see gas development more on par with what Otsego County might see if fracking is allowed.

"We can learn a great deal from Pennsylvania," he said.

According to Powers, the state has shown that drilling can be done safely if it is carefully regulated and the right procedures are in place. "That's what New York is working on doing," he said.

Powers, who is a member of the pro-drilling Central New York Landowners Coalition, said he wants to focus on getting ready for drilling if it is coming. This includes public meetings with landowners and industries.

"We need to be more knowledgeable about what's happening," he said.

City of Oneonta Alderman and Otsego County Conservation Association Executive Director Erik Miller said he "wears several hats" on the issues and can see the pros and cons.

Miller said the speakers the group heard from seemed to emphasize the benefits of gas drilling and downplay the problems, as if gas drilling was a foregone conclusion.

As an environmentalist, Miller said he found it discouraging that there were no regulations that will ensure groundwater protection. One accident in a place like Oneonta or Cooperstown could affect hundreds of thousands, he said.

His personal opinion won't change as the process continues, but as an elected official, "it's my duty to ensure that it is done properly," he said. That includes making sure local benefits outweigh local risks.

With infrastructure improvements, and the increased development the industry could bring, Miller said he wondered what would happen when the gas is gone.

"With proper planning there's a better chance of having positive results than just the short term," he said.

As a taxpayer, Miller said he would love to see a local industry that can pay local benefits.

"You wouldn't want to see gas drilling come to the area and export natural resources as a third-world country," Miller said.

Otsego County Chamber President and CEO Rob Robinson said he is "still contemplating all the different pieces" of natural gas drilling.

Robinson said the Chamber is evenly split about fracking, and that before he would recommend a position, "I need to do the rest of my homework."

The trip provided some clarity, Robinson said, but there was still some contradictions among what he heard, such as the amount of well pollution.

Robinson said he is most interested in the economic promise of gas drilling and the responsibilities of gas companies. He said the Chamber can work with the county to help educate landowners about the companies that are seeking leases in the area.

Robinson said he will ask Gov. Andrew Cuomo to ensure state funding for monitoring by the Department of Environmental Conservation, including money set aside in case companies don't meet their obligations.

It could also be used to pay for private water testing to help monitor wells when individuals can't afford it, he said.

County planning director Terry Bliss said the idea for the trip began when Powers came back from a visit to Dimock about a month ago. In discussing the day, participants told him the county should be more active in sponsoring public information sessions.

"We don't need to sponsor debates about whether it's right or wrong," Bliss said, but he agreed the county could help facilitate debates on related topics such as social issues, housing, rural preservation, property values and taxes.

Otsego Farm Bureau board member Steve Sinniger said the trip was worthwhile.

"We're headed in the right direction," in the way the county is looking at fracking. With these kinds of activities, it is doing it "the right way."

Sinniger said he was reassured to hear that companies had solutions to problems such as wear and tear on roads because of increased truck traffic.

Unlike Pennsylvania, New York allows municipalities to levy taxes that help pay some of the additional costs the industry would bring, Sinniger pointed out. Some of the money would go to schools, towns and counties, he said.

Sinniger said his opinion hasn't changed because of the trip _ he said he feels fracking is worth doing, if it's done right.

The revenue would also benefit local farmers by helping them stay in the industry. If his family's Otego farm had a producing well, it might not have been sold back in 2000, he said.

"I see quite a few economic boosts," he said. "The negatives can be worked out, if the funding is there."

Not everyone found the trip educational; Teresa Winchester of Butternuts said she wasn't sure she learned anything new from traveling to Pennsylvania.

Winchester, who is opposed to gas drilling, said she believes that while some may gain from the process, "the rest of us will be paying the costs for the contracts."

One informative piece of the trip for Winchester was the emphasis on zoning, she said, adding that "I don't think

we are anywhere near ready for it." 