

County works to create gas drilling task force

By **Mary Perham**

Corning Leader/Bath Courier

Posted Apr 11, 2010 @ 12:31 AM

Bath, N.Y. — Steuben County is in the process of developing a task force to address issues surrounding future drilling of natural gas in the Marcellus Shale formation.

The Steuben County Legislature's Agriculture, Industry and Planning Committee last week laid the foundation for a task force in preparation of an expansion of the drilling industry.

The county Planning Department is assisting in establishing the scope of the task force which includes the possible effects drilling would have on communities, local economies, land use and the demand for government services, said county Planning Department representative Amy Dlugos.

Dlugos said the task force would include a steering committee and sub-committees.

"We've looked at other counties," Dlugos said. "And more and more things come up."

Other issues the task force would look at include property assessments, environmental impacts, increased crime, road use agreements and housing, she said.

Regional issues, such as agriculture and tourism, would be studied by a region-wide group, Dlugos said.

Concerns about drilling in the Marcellus Shale have been growing in the Southern Tier in recent months, largely in response to the hydraulic fracture method now used to drill horizontally through the shale layers.

Commonly known as hydrofracking, the method uses a high volume of chemically treated water forced at high speed to break up the shale. Used for the past several years in Texas and the Southwest, the method has been blamed for contaminated water, illness and cancers, and spoiled land.

Several residents attended the meeting to warn the committee about the problems associated with hydrofracking and warn about the effects the massive drilling campaign would have on the county.

Mark Schlechter, of Bath, told the committee the task force should look at three main components: infrastructure, environment and economic. The county should be prepared to help municipalities with issues, too, he said.

Schlechter also urged the county to consider moratoriums – similar to those in Onondaga County – to delay drilling until the county has plans in place to absorb the large-scale operation, and the federal government closes existing loopholes.

John Benson, of Hornby, told the committee he drove through drilling areas near Mansfield.

"I (didn't) want to react to the awfullizing that's going on," he said. "But it's another world down there now."

Legislator Joe Hauryski, R-Campbell, attended a recent meeting on drilling and urged the county to look for more information.

"How we prepare for the task force will decide whether it can be effective," Hauryski said. "We need to do it right from the beginning, to get it right in the end."

Hauryski said later he will push to have a representative from the Steuben County Landowners Coalition on the task force.

The coalition was formed two years ago, when county residents near the Pennsylvania border learned about the drilling. At that time, gas companies were asking landowners to renew their leases for reportedly low amounts.

While the group wants to assure landowners receive a fair payment for leasing rights, it also intends to make sure the drilling is safe for the environment and people, according to one of the coalition's founders, Kenny Knowles, of Woodhull.

Knowles said some landowners are now being approached about leases.

But no one is turning a blind eye to possible issues, Knowles said. If anything the intense scrutiny by local residents should help prevent problems, since the gas companies know they are being monitored, he said.

"We're for the protection of our own land, our ground water, our families, our neighbors. The more we know, the more vigilant the companies will be," Knowles said. "The other side of this argument is substantial. This is an opportunity for this county. This may be the biggest thing to ever come here."

Copyright 2010 The Corning Leader. Some rights reserved

Comments (2)

EMT24

1 day ago

Report Abuse

You must be logged in to report abuse.