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Towns right to act against fracking

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The battle over natural gas drilling rages on in New York state. It's not going away any time soon. Hundreds of opponents gathered outside the state Capitol on Monday to protest hydraulic fracturing, the process of injecting sand, water and chemicals into the ground to break shale and release natural gas.

There is a statewide moratorium that prevents horizontal "fracking" from occurring until July 1. The Department of Environmental Conservation is working on its second draft of an environmental impact study on the process.

We called for a moratorium last year and have recently argued for a ban on horizontal gas drilling in New York. Until the oil and gas industry can demonstrate that it can extract the gas from the ground safely, we will stand by our call for a statewide ban.

In the meantime, though, we are pleased to see some of our local towns taking up the issue through zoning and other measures.

We cannot afford to wait for statewide regulations, which may or may not contain language and restrictions that satisfy everyone. It is wise for local towns to take steps now to limit or ban gas drilling.

New York has the luxury of learning from other states' mistakes, as fracking has been ongoing in Pennsylvania, Texas, Wyoming and other states. Many problems have been reported in those areas, from contaminated drinking water to exploding gas wells.

We certainly don't need the type of drilling environment that Pennsylvania now has. Pennsylvania officials have repeatedly been criticized for not properly handling the state's natural gas boom.

The Associated Press reported Wednesday that Pennsylvania environmental regulators spend as little as 35 minutes reviewing each of the thousands of applications for natural gas well permits they get each year. And the regulators say they do not give any additional scrutiny to requests to drill near high-quality streams and rivers even though state and federal law protect the waterways.

Our area is leading the state in testing the waters to see how far towns can go in limiting this sort of industrial process. The eyes of New York are upon us.

We applaud local governments for taking on this issue, and for doing so thoughtfully and cautiously. To some, this will be seen as nothing more than NIMBYism. They will argue that our energy must come from somewhere, and that our communities will miss out on the financial gain that natural gas drilling could bring.

Perhaps this is true. But we believe the costs of horizontal hydrofracking are just too high to justify the potential gains. And it would seem the leaders of several local towns agree.