

## Fracking foes outnumber proponents at Ulster forum

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STONE RIDGE — Hydrofracturing — or at least public debate on the topic — arrived Wednesday in Ulster County, and it didn't receive a warm welcome.

"Right out there is a big source of energy: It's called the sun," said Woodstock resident David Gross, one of roughly 125 people to pack the SUNY Ulster student lounge. "But Dick Cheney can't own it."

The almost uniformly anti-fracking audience welcomed news from natural gas industry representative Scott Cline that minimal shale depth and excessively thermal maturity — rock that has been "cooked" too much — make Ulster County land ill-suited for drilling.

"I think the eastern part (of New York state), including Ulster County, may not be prospective," he said. "But until we drill, we don't know."

Cline played up the economic benefits of natural gas, pledging that drilling "a few hundred wells" could almost entirely eliminate the need for property taxes.

"The stakes for the landowners who have the right to the minerals are great and cannot be minimized," he said.

West Hurley lawyer Richard Grossman — one of 17 audience members to speak against legalizing the practice in New York — disagreed with Cline's assertion.

"People don't have the right to use their property in a way that harms others," he said.

Ronald Bishop, a chemistry and biochemistry professor at SUNY Oneonta, emphasized fracking's potential health and environmental risks, and said the state has currently just one inspector for every 800 wells. There are 13,300 oil and natural gas wells, and just 16 DEC agents regulating them.

"Will our grandchildren thank us for selling the energy out from under their feet?" he asked "Or should we start to save it for a strategic oil reserve?"

The forum was sponsored by a committee of the Ulster County Legislature, which banned fracking on a county-owned lands in March. This was primarily a symbolic gesture, since virtually none of that lands is suitable for fracking.

Binghamton attorney Robert Wedlake said a countywide ban on horizontal drilling probably couldn't stand legal challenges because it counters the state's official policy — which encourages responsible gas development — and denies landowners full use of their property. Wedlake has worked on gas leases for several years.

Several municipalities in the Southern Tier have considered a de facto ban by prohibiting heavy trucks, which are necessary to move fracking materials. Wedlake isn't aware, however, of any enacted laws or active cases pertaining to fracking bans.

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