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New group pursues gas drilling

Coalition offers Twin Tiers reach

As natural gas drilling activity heats up across the Twin Tiers, landowner coalitions have started forming.

A new coalition was recently launched that says it will offer property owners features other coalitions don't.

The Twin Tiers Landowners Coalition serves Steuben County in New York and Tioga County, Pa., and founders Mike White and Phil Knapp hope to expand into other counties as the coalition grows.

The purpose of the new coalition is to get the best deal possible for landowners when representatives from natural gas exploration companies come knocking on their doors.

There is already a landowner coalition in Steuben County, but White said his team has more experience.

"Our consultants are more experienced and our contacts run deeper," he said.

"The fellows we have working for us are the guys I'd want to represent my own land, and to make that work out best for everybody, we started to bring as many people in with us as possible.

"We want to provide a mechanism for landowners anywhere in the Twin Tiers eventually to have some sort of grouping where they can take advantage of the power of numbers," White said.

"We're looking to Steuben and Tioga as closest to home, but we're getting a lot of interest spread out in all directions."

Consultants help

Two professional consultants are working with the Twin Tiers Landowners Coalition - Gregory H. Sovas, president of XRM, LLC, and former director of the state Department of Environmental Conservation's Division of Mineral Resources; and attorney Adam Schultz, who has experience in issues dealing with mineral resources and the environment, according to the coalition.

The coalition will bargain on behalf of landowners to obtain the best possible deal from gas exploration companies possible, White said.

The coalition's services are free to the landowner, and once a contract is agreed upon, the coalition will collect a fee - paid by the gas company - based on the total amount paid to the property owner.

Relationships between landowners and natural gas companies have often been adversarial, but White believes it's in everyone's best interest to treat the gas companies as partners, not enemies.

"I think we have to be responsive to their needs as well as the landowners. They are the ones paying the money. The better we can work with them, the more likely they are to give us a good lease," White said.

"We have to be sensitive to what gas companies are looking for. If we can provide that and protect the rights of landowners at the same time, we have achieved our goal."

Profit motive claimed

Ken Knowles of Woodhull, chairman of the Steuben County Landowners Coalition, said he's familiar with the new group, but said they are more profit-oriented than his organization.

"The ringleader was in our coalition. He had dollar signs in his eyes," Knowles said.

"We're a volunteer group. They are looking for whatever promotion they can get. We're under sponsorship of farm bureau."

White, who lives in the Addison area, signed a 10-year lease with a natural gas company about 11 years ago, and over the course of that lease, he realized there were many things he wished he had done differently.

With the latest push to explore the huge natural gas deposits in the Marcellus shale formation, there is no better time than now to join the coalition and get in on the action, White said.

"I think it's just a tremendous opportunity for landowners, if they are careful and don't let themselves be taken advantage of," he said.

"Marcellus will be huge. I don't think people understand how big economically this will be for the area. From what I can see, it's the single biggest thing that's ever happened to this area, ever - certainly in our lifetime."

* In a recent column, I talked about the closure of Confections bakery in Horseheads, which has been a downtown fixture since the early 1960s.

The family of the original owners wrote to inform us that the bakery was first known as Bonnings Pastry Shop, and was owned by Charles and Jane Bonning. It wasn't renamed Confections until it changed hands a few times.

Additional Facts

more information

* To learn more about the Twin Tiers Landowners Coalition, call (607) 359-3311 or go online to www.twintlc.com.
