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Concerns aired on syngas plant plan

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By Tim Knauss

Staff writer

Dr. Spiro Tzetis, of Jamesville, has two children who go to Jamesville Elementary School, a stone's throw from where developers plan to build a massive coal-to-methane energy plant.

Southwood firefighter Pat Sullivan has four children who attend or will attend the school.

Both men told the DeWitt Planning Board on Thursday they are concerned about the large quantity of sulfuric acid that would be produced as a byproduct at the facility.

"I just think it's way too close" to the school, Sullivan said.

Those were among the concerns expressed as the planning board held the first of what promised to be many meetings on a proposal from Empire Synfuel LLC. The company wants to build a facility that would convert 10,000 tons of coal per day into natural gas.

"This is a very, very preliminary meeting," said Michael Lazar, the planning board chairman. He promised to hold an informational meeting in the future where residents will be encouraged to raise concerns that can be incorporated into the town's review of the project.

The planning board's purpose Thursday was to begin the process of reviewing the proposal under the provisions of the State Environmental Quality Review Act. The only action taken was to declare the project appropriate for the most thorough type of SEQRA review.

About 80 attended the meeting.

Empire Synfuel, a company launched by New York City entrepreneur Adam Victor, wants to build the energy complex on a 126-acre industrial site in Jamesville that formerly housed Alpha Portland Cement Co.

Project manager Jack Loveland said the innovative project would be good for New York because it would reduce the state's reliance on costly natural gas by making use of a plentiful American resource, coal.

He also said the process would be clean, unlike coal-burning power plants, discharging less than 100 tons per year of any federally regulated toxins.

But Jamesville residents have expressed concerns about the size of the project and its proximity to the school and residential neighborhoods.

To go forward, the Empire Synfuel project needs permits or approvals from the state Department of Environmental Conservation, the state Department of Transportation, the state Public Service Commission and Onondaga County, in addition to the town of DeWitt.

The next step will be to determine which agency will take the lead in reviewing the project's environmental impacts. Lazar said the town's consulting engineering firm, O'Brien & Gere, will review Empire Synfuel's application to determine whether it is complete enough to start the process.

Planning board attorney Jamie Sutphen said the board will likely choose to be the lead agency, but that decision has not yet been made. Other agencies will be notified and will have an opportunity to seek the lead, she said.

Loveland, the project manager for Empire Synfuel, was formerly president of O'Brien & Gere engineering. He said much of the anxiety about the proposal stems from "fear of the unknown," which he hopes will subside as the company provides more details.

"We have an obligation to educate them about what we're intending to do," he said.

Empire Synfuel has an option to buy the property from owner John Murphy of JMJ Associates.

Here's an outline of what Empire Synfuel has proposed:

The company envisions a large complex of buildings and other structures arranged along the outside of a 1.25-mile-long oval loop of train tracks.

Some 110 railroad cars would arrive six days a week, disgorging 10,000 tons of Appalachian coal into a building.

The coal would travel along a conveyor and be dropped into the top of 12 gasifiers. Heat, combined with steam, would break the coal down into a synthesis gas, or syngas, composed mainly of hydrogen and carbon monoxide.

The syngas would be pumped through a series of pipes, vessels and reactors to strip out unwanted elements, such as sulfur and mercury. Sulfur would be converted to sulfuric acid to be sold.

The plant would ship about six rail cars of sulfuric acid per day.

The syngas would be converted to methane, the main component of natural gas. The methane would be compressed and pumped through a 2-mile-long pipeline to connect with an interstate gas pipeline.

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