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Plan to send fracking wastewater near Keuka Lake is abandoned

By Jeff Murray • jd Murray@gannett.com • February 16, 2010, 6:50 pm

A contentious plan to locate a wastewater disposal site in the Steuben County town of Pulteney is officially dead, although the company that proposed the project is leaving the door open for similar facilities in the future.

Chesapeake Energy sought approval to convert an abandoned natural gas well on the west side of Keuka Lake into a site that would accept more than 180,000 gallons of wastewater a day.

The wastewater is a byproduct of the hydraulic fracturing procedure, or hydrofracking, used to tap the Marcellus Shale natural gas formation.

Chesapeake's plans drew widespread resistance from local governments as well as residents in Pulteney and around Keuka Lake.

The company Tuesday submitted letters to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and state Department of Environmental Conservation, asking that its permit applications be withdrawn.

However, the decision to withdraw was not the result of public outcry, said David Spigelmyer, Chesapeake's vice president of government relations.

"We've been working on enhancing and developing our recycling program. There's no immediate need for us to have this permit," said Spigelmyer, who said the decision was also influenced by New York's moratorium on Marcellus Shale exploration.

"If we are able to develop Marcellus Shale in New York state, we wouldn't want to remove options from the table," he said. "It might be necessary to have disposal facilities in the future."

Underground injection wells are closely monitored by the EPA, and Chesapeake Energy is comfortable with their safety, Spigelmyer added.

The controversy tore into the fabric of the Keuka Lake community, said Pulteney Town Supervisor Bill Weber.

"It's done some damage to the community, too, that we need to repair. There was some mistrust," Weber said. "I wish there was some graceful way of telling all the people who were shouting that vocal opposition doesn't cut it with EPA and DEC. The most important thing is to open communications with the people involved and deal with it in a sensible fashion."

U.S. Rep. Eric Massa, D-Corning, disagreed.

Even though Chesapeake's letters to the regulatory agencies specifically said the decision to withdraw wasn't based on public outcry, Massa said he believes the opposition did make a difference.

"The concerned citizens of the Finger Lakes showed everyone that a strong grassroots movement can defy all odds and emerge victorious," Massa said in a prepared statement. "While some politicians may try to swoop in and take [credit](#) for today's news, clearly this victory belongs to the citizens that fought to protect the place they call home."

State Sen. George H. Winner Jr., R-Elmira, also applauded Chesapeake's decision to withdraw. And he said Marcellus Shale exploration should still be encouraged, but cautiously.

"Moving forward, I can't stress enough that our communities will always be best served by a careful, complete, serious, objective and thoughtful consideration of the future of the Marcellus Shale [natural gas](#) industry," Winner said in a news release.

Walter Hang, president of Ithaca-based Toxics Targeting Inc., has been working with Pulteney residents on the wastewater issue.

Even with Chesapeake's decision, the Pulteney saga proves this is a problem that has not been adequately addressed by DEC and others, Hang said.

"That was obviously a ridiculously bad location to put a deep well injection facility," he said. "Why would you ship that water hundreds of miles to the middle of nowhere and move it to within a mile of this historic jewel of a Finger Lake?"

For Pulteney, at least, that is now a moot point, and residents are relieved and happy.

"The citizens' resounding grassroots movement showed that a billion-dollar corporation couldn't have their way," said Jeff Andrysick of Gallagher Road in Pulteney. "I think this was not only a Pulteney, but a lake-wide, movement.

"I've never seen citizens around this lake more united on any issue. All of Pulteney is going to celebrate tonight."