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Lehman Township says yes to gas drilling

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LEHMAN TWP. - Township residents will be getting a new neighbor when EnCana Oil and Gas USA begins drilling for natural gas in late summer.

Township officials voted unanimously Tuesday night to approve an ordinance allowing the company to start Marcellus Shale gas drilling operations near Peaceful Valley Road.

Board of Supervisors Vice Chairman Ray Iwanowski made the motion to enact the ordinance and Chairman David Sutton and Supervisor Douglas Ide voted yes.

Township Zoning Board Solicitor Jack Haley addressed a well-mannered crowd of about 70 people before the vote, essentially telling them the township was in no position to halt the company's plans.

Some residents who expressed opposition wanted the supervisors to "send a message" by not enacting the ordinance, Haley said. That would have amounted to "civil disobedience," he said. According to Haley, all authority to halt drilling operations in any municipality in Pennsylvania lies in the hands of state agencies, not local governments. The township's rules are "superseded" by the state Oil and Gas Act, he said.

The state Supreme Court already reviewed two similar cases, he added, and decided the only authority Lehman Township has applies to what roads EnCana can use.

Haley also addressed concerns raised that two of the supervisors, Ide and Sutton, have personal ties to gas drilling. Ide leased some of his own land for gas drilling, and Sutton consults property owners concerning drilling, Haley said.

Both members could only second the motion or vote yes but could not participate in any questions about the vote or make the original motion. The only supervisor who could make the motion was Iwanowski.

The state Ethics Commission checked into the potential conflict of interest involving the two supervisors.

Iwanowski outlined six conditions to the motion: that EnCana put up \$13,540 to maintain Firehouse Road through the total time it is used; EnCana put up \$32,192 to maintain Peaceful Valley Road similarly; all traffic related to the drilling traverse on Firehouse Road toward state Route 118; no traffic will go on Old Route 115 in the township (near the school); EnCana provide adequate insurance coverage for the township, and that a legally binding agreement be signed by EnCana holding it to its commitment.

No representatives from EnCana attended the meeting.

About 25 peaceful protesters were there greeting meeting attendees at the door with anti-drilling literature. Leanne Mazurick, 30, of Dallas Township, stressed the industry is essentially "unregulated." She said residents in other communities of Northeastern Pennsylvania are having trouble with water contamination where there is drilling.

"We want safeguards put in place," she said.

Karen Belli, of Dallas Township, and member of Gas Drilling Awareness Coalition, emphasized a long list of ills that arise from local gas drilling. She pointed to homeowners in one local community have to use "water buffaloes" for their water supply because of the contamination. Belli also questioned how Supervisors Ide and Sutton could be involved in the vote knowing their connections to the industry.

Not all in attendance were opposed. Barry Edwards, of Lehman Township, said the concerns about water are just a "harangue." He added that in Susquehanna County the drilling companies have made the roads "better than the ever."

Iwanowski said fixed-income elderly residents and farmers facing large debt are finding the gas drilling a financial "godsend."

He said the ordinance allows EnCana to drill only vertically. If it wishes to expand horizontally underground that will require another vote from the township.

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