

Tioga County Task Force Concerned About Public Impacts of Gas Drilling

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Horizontal drilling through the Marcellus shale has been “put on hold” until the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) completes its study, but that doesn’t mean that natural gas companies have packed up their rigs and gone home. Each week DEC continues to process permit applications, and every now and then you can see the orange glow of flaring gas reflected off the hillsides at night.

Anticipating renewed interest in drilling, a group of agencies and community leaders from across Tioga County have been working together to address natural gas drilling impacts and opportunities. After two months of organizational meetings, the group has now formalized their initiative as “TING” – Tioga County Investigates Natural Gas. In comments sent to the press last week, the members of TING emphasized that their intent is to address public sector impacts and opportunities. They do not intend to stop or hinder gas companies from doing business in the county, nor do they intend to address individual land-owner concerns.

The ad-hoc committee began with a question, said Martha Goodsell, a member on the TING Steering Committee. As a farmer and board member of Tioga County Farm Bureau, Goodsell actively participates in a number of discussions and committees. It was during an Ag-Resources group meeting that Goodsell asked, “Why can’t we create a similar group to address issues of natural gas?”

Landowner coalitions address landowner and leasing issues, Goodsell noted, and other private groups address environmental or other specific issues related to gas exploration and drilling. What was lacking, Goodsell thought, was communication between different parts of municipal government and between the various municipalities. There was no single group to address the greater community concerns.

“It is critical to get town officials involved and to be pro-active,” Goodsell said. The question was how. So in March she and nearly a dozen others began meeting as working group. Their goals: to coordinate and streamline the fragmented activities of many groups in a manner that would address what gas drilling activities might mean for the public sector of Tioga County.

“When gas drilling comes to Tioga County, we want to make sure that it is on our terms,” Goodsell explained. The working group began with brainstorming sessions, listing how gas drilling might impact the community as well as the opportunities that the industry would bring.

“When we began, we knew that roads were going to be an important issue,” Goodsell said. Issues of road damage and protecting public investment in infrastructure came up in nearly every meeting Goodsell attended, from town meetings to those held in surrounding

counties. She made a point of noting important items on her “issue list”, bringing them back to the working group for discussion.

Over the past two months the working group invited speakers to address the group; municipal officials from counties in Pennsylvania already experiencing intensive drilling, or other experts. The group members have also traveled to meetings in Bradford County and Athens in Pennsylvania, as well as Tompkins County to learn how public officials are addressing issues related to gas activities. “We’re focusing on where we can go to learn new information,” Goodsell explained.

Tioga County Planning Director Elaine Jardine coordinates the TING meetings and does a lot of the work necessary to keep the group functioning. She explained that now the group is getting down to the serious “boots on the ground” work.

“We’ve been looking for knowledgeable people to work on the subcommittees,” Jardine said. So far there are four subcommittees: Roads and Infrastructure, Water Quality, Workforce Development, and Public Safety. Other issues that TING plans to address include: business opportunities, employment, local economy, taxes, education, housing and additional environmental concerns such as soils, landscape, and pollution.

“But for now we’re putting our focus on roads, water quality, public safety, and workforce development,” Jardine said. These subcommittees will investigate, research and provide recommendations to the TING Steering Committee.

For example, Jardine said, the subcommittee on water quality will collect baseline data on water resources. Most drinking water is dependent on the aquifer, Jardine explained, so the testing will focus on wells and groundwater, not surface water. Because the Department of Health has jurisdiction over drinking water quality, Johannes Peeters, Director of the Tioga County Health Department, will be chairing this subcommittee.

Dick LeCount, Director of Tioga County Emergency Management Office, heads up the public safety subcommittee. According to Jardine this committee is already busy drawing up a list of the various actions they need to address, from developing evacuation plans in case of an accident to making sure they have a current list of all chemicals used by the gas companies.

Both Goodsell and Jardine emphasize the need for collaboration between public agencies, municipal officials and private groups, as well as interested individuals to address the diverse public sector issues associated with natural gas drilling. Jardine explained that subcommittee members are identified and recruited based on the issues that TING identifies, but added that membership of these subcommittees is intended to be inclusive and dynamic.

The TING Steering Committee currently includes eleven representatives from Tioga County including: the Legislature, Planning, Soil & Water Conservation District, Rural Economic Area Partnership (REAP), Cornell Cooperative Extension, Farm Bureau, Council of Governments, Environmental Management Council, a business representative

(appointed by the Chamber of Commerce) and members at large. County Planning Director Elaine Jardine provides staff support.

For more information about TING contact the Tioga County Planning Director, Elaine Jardine at 687-8257 or by email at jardinee@co.tioga.ny.us.