

Horseheads Village Approves Schlumberger Project

Citizens request full environmental impact statement

by Sue Smith-Heavenrich

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Despite public concern about environmental issues, the Horseheads Village Board of Trustees gave final approval to the site plans for a proposed Schlumberger Technology gas drilling service facility last week. After a contentious public hearing on Tuesday, October 13, the board adjourned, making plans to hold a special meeting later in the week. On Thursday they gave the go-ahead for Schlumberger to begin construction on their 88-acre facility located at the industrial Center at Horseheads.

There are a few conditions, among them the requirement that Schlumberger obtain final review and approval of their Stormwater Pollution Prevention Plan (SWPPP), complete a groundwater monitoring plan, and comply with a short list of village code items. Schlumberger still has to apply for building permits, but construction should begin within a few weeks. Glenn Harvey of Bergmann Associates estimates that it will take about one-and-a-half years to complete the building project.

At Tuesday's hearing, which got a bit raucous at times, village attorney John Groff reminded the crowd of 100 that the environmental issues had been resolved (on October 6, the village board issued a "negative declaration" meaning that no further environmental review was necessary). Groff tried to keep comments focused solely on the site plan itself.

Environmental Concerns

The village board may have considered the SEQR review complete, but residents continued to raise concerns about the potential environmental effects of Schlumberger's proposed chemical storage facility. Alleging that the decision seemed hasty, a number of citizens challenged the village board to conduct a complete environmental impact statement.

Horseheads resident Susan Multer told the village board that, despite their assurances that they will receive a more detailed traffic study, she remains concerned about the number of trucks that will be idling and driving through the residential area.

Pam Quattrini lives on Ridge Road, one of the streets bordering the Schlumberger site. "This site is on top of an aquifer that supplies water to two main bodies of water," she said, referring to Seneca Lake, and the Susquehanna River that spills into Chesapeake Bay.

As often as people brought environmental concerns to the floor, Groff interrupted with the reminder that the environmental review was over and this particular hearing was focusing only on the site plan.

"The [Schlumberger] site is next to ball fields and an elementary school," said one mother. "I don't believe there are [adequate] plans in place if a spill occurs. Environmental issues must be considered as part of this site plan."

“All the environmental concerns have been addressed,” Groff retorted. “The mitigations were adequate and the board issued a negative declaration.”

“Mitigation doesn’t take away a problem,” said Julie Spicer. Her concern is that the village board focused on the mitigation measures during the environmental review process. “But mitigation just means to make something less severe, less painful,” Spicer explained. “There are still things going in the water that can never be taken out of the water. Mitigation is not the answer and, quite frankly, it doesn’t hold water.”

At one point Groff, clearly frustrated by the continued focus on environmental issues, reiterated that the focus should be on the site plan. “It’s my public hearing!” he declared. The room filled with jeers as a number of people shouted back, “But we’re the public; it’s our hearing.”

Economic Dreams

Although they were in the minority, a number of people spoke in favor of the Schlumberger project. Michael Sincock, who lives in Pine City, pointed out that Horseheads Center is already an industrial site. He noted that Schlumberger has gone through a lot of effort with their plans.

“The environmental issues have been overblown,” Sincock said. “We should be honored to have Schlumberger in our backyard.” Other people working in construction and construction supply agreed with his sentiments. Sue Warner said that Schlumberger is a “green company” that will bring hundreds of jobs to the area. She asked for a final decision to be made quickly.

Chemung County Farm Bureau president Ashur Terwilliger, holding up a recent issue of Newsweek, said the magazine included Schlumberger in their list of the top 500 “green companies”. Schlumberger came in at 118, much higher than another local industry, Corning Inc.

After acknowledging the months of work by the Horseheads Village Board, Kevin Keeley, president of the Chemung County Chamber of Commerce, pointed out that Schlumberger has gone to great lengths to accommodate community interests. “They are enhancing the industrial site both cosmetically and economically,” he said, “by taking a fallow site and making it useful.”

A Complex Issue

One of the things that was brought up many times during this hearing and those held earlier is that people want to see economic progress; but not at the expense of clean water and breathable air.

“Being concerned about environmental and health issues is not [equivalent to] trying to stop a company or stop people from getting jobs,” Multer pointed out. “It’s trying to make things safer for everyone.”

Ellen McHugh, a pediatrician and dairy farmer, tried to put the complex issue into perspective. “We would love to see this area prosper,” she said. She and her husband have leased their land to a gas company, so it would be in her interest to have Schlumberger situated nearby.

But she is concerned about the health effects of the stored chemicals on the most vulnerable citizens in the area: children.

“The bottom line is that we don’t have enough information,” McHugh said.