

Citizen Concern Over Schlumberger Project Growing

by Helen Slottje

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Nearly 40 residents attended the August 11 meeting of the Horseheads Village Planning Board to express their concern about the proposed Schlumberger project at Horseheads Center. Planning board member Mike Stenpeck noted that the board received a dozen comment letters on the project over the past month, a significant increase over the two they had received as of July 31.

People at the meeting expressed concern about the dust from expected truck traffic at the proposed facility as well as the chemicals that Schlumberger may be storing and transporting from their warehouse.

In what appears to be a clear violation of state law, Schlumberger has cleared and leveled almost 9 acres at their proposed industrial site. NY state law prohibits project activity until the environmental review process is completed. However, chairman of the planning board Raymond Fortier explained that Schlumberger was granted a 6-month permit under provisions of the village code that allow Schlumberger to relocate some of its trucks from their Bradford, PA site and conduct business from an 8.8 acre portion of the site. Schlumberger has already installed truck bays and administrative trailers and erected chemical silos. They are also operating at least some of their truck fleet from the site.

Ron Sherman, the village's engineering consultant, assured the public that a cement slab had been installed under the truck bays and that containment tanks located beneath the slabs were being pumped.

Some members of the audience questioned whether these preliminary precautions would adequately protect Catherine Creek from potential contamination in stormwater runoff from the recently cleared site. Don Quinn of Horseheads noted that there is a large network of pipes dating to the 1940's that lie under the entire former Holding Point area. These pipes connect into the Susquehanna watershed to the south and to the Seneca Lake and Great Lakes watershed to the north.

Schlumberger has promised to provide the village with information on the hydro-fracking, acidizing and other chemicals; explosives and radioactive materials that will be stored on site. That information should be coming within the next few weeks.

However, Schlumberger has neglected to inform the village about what chemicals are currently being stored on, and transported from, the site. A few residents questioned how the village could be confident that the aquifer was protected if no one knows what business Schlumberger is presently conducting from the site. Don Quinn commented that the aquifer is like a bubble, and cannot be repaired once it has burst.

People also questioned whether the scope of the planning board's environmental review was appropriate and asked about what impacts need to be considered. The State Environmental Quality Review (SEQR) requires that the "whole action" be considered.

Many residents feel that the Environmental Assessment Form (EAF) and other materials Schlumberger has provided to the planning board do not adequately address the environmental impacts of the "whole action". Impacts of the proposed renovation of the railroad track, the reconstruction of "E" Street, and the construction of the connector road to Route 13 are not addressed in the EAF or the other studies provided by Schlumberger, and they have yet to be included in the village's environmental review.

The village requested to be the Lead Agency in reviewing the Schlumberger project and, as such, is charged with considering the totality of the project's impacts - not just those impacts affecting the village. Despite the state law mandating that they consider all of the impacts of the project, including the impacts on neighboring communities, the planning board seems to have taken the position that their focus need only be on the impacts to the Village of Horseheads.

The SEQR law provides that a Lead Agency may impose mitigation measures that are otherwise outside of its jurisdiction, or are otherwise the jurisdiction of other agencies. But last Tuesday the planning board made it clear that they will deal only with the site plan review. They suggested that residents from the town and surrounding areas take their concerns elsewhere.

What's Next?

The planning board will meet again on Tuesday, August 25 at 5:30pm in the Horseheads Village Hall. At that meeting they will determine whether they have received enough information from Schlumberger to advance to the next step in reviewing the EAF.

Schlumberger has promised that before that date they will provide the village with a revised traffic study, an economic study, information on chemicals and quantities, and other information requested by the planning board.

Once the planning board has all the information it has requested, it will begin consideration of the project impacts by answering questions set forth in the EAF. These include impacts to the land, water, air quality, plants and animals; aesthetic qualities of the area; traffic, noise, odors, public health, and character of the community. Only then will they determine whether the project will have a significant environmental impact.

When asked whether Schlumberger would agree that an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is required for a project of this magnitude, Schlumberger representative Jason Brady said that they would answer that question at the August 25 meeting. He remarked that the company will undertake any action required by the regulatory process, but seemed disinclined to suggest that Schlumberger might apply its resources to mitigating any concerns beyond that.

The planning board urges concerned members of the public to send them comments in writing, and has promised to read them all. Comments may be addressed to the

Horseheads Village Planning Board and mailed to 202 South Main Street, Horseheads NY 14845 or faxed to 607-739-3941. If you have questions or want to know where to e-mail your comments, please call the village clerk at 607-739-5691.

Helen Slottje, an attorney from Ithaca, is a member of Broader View's "citizen reporting network".