

Ithaca Hearing Evolves into Forum against Fracking

by Sue Smith-Heavenrich

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Don't frack here; don't frack now. That was the overriding message speaker after speaker delivered at last week's public hearing in Ithaca. Close to 850 people crowded into Ithaca's State Theater on Thursday night, December 1 to comment on high-volume horizontal hydraulic fracturing. From water quality to health to economic impacts, people criticized DEC's most recent draft Supplemental Generic Environmental Impact Statement (SGEIS).

Tompkins County Council of Governments (TCCOG) hosted the "unofficial" public forum because said Dominic Frongillo, "the NY State Department of Environmental Conservation did not schedule a hearing convenient to the Finger Lakes region." Frongillo, a councilman for the Town of Caroline, moderated the four-hour session and frequently reminded the audience to demonstrate their appreciation for comments in a non-auditory way. "The stenographer needs to hear the speakers," he said.

Although the NY State Department of Environmental Conservation did not sponsor the event, a representative attended the forum in the capacity of "observer". The lack of DEC sponsorship, however, means that Tompkins County must bear the \$5,000 cost of the event. TCCOG collected written comments at the hearing, comments that this week will be hand-delivered to DEC along with the transcript of oral testimony.

The most frequent criticism leveled of the draft SGEIS was that it is too narrow. Tompkins County Legislature Chair Martha Robertson noted that DEC received 14,000 public comments in response to their initial draft of the document. The revised version is somewhat improved, she said, but it still fails to adequately address cumulative impacts.

Every Environmental Impact Statement is required to address cumulative impacts to prevent degradation of the environment, Robertson explained. In addition, DEC has failed in its job to regulate the density of drilling pads and, Robertson contends, offers "no adequate plan to clean wastewater". She also criticized DEC's lack of support for home rule, as that would allow communities a strong tool to mitigate local impacts of the highly industrialized shale drilling. "Until and unless a more benign technology is developed and required," she said, "the only appropriate mitigation would be a statewide ban on fracking."

Rebecca Bowen told DEC that all water sources should receive equal protection. Because of the lack of filtration, NYC and Syracuse water reservoirs are protected with buffers that are wider than the typical reach of a horizontal arm, Bowen noted. But town aquifers and individual drinking water wells – which also have no filtration devices – are not protected.

Sandra Steingraber, Ithaca College scholar-in-residence and Heinz Award recipient addressed the lack of adequate protections for health. Hydrofracking releases hydrocarbons and other pollutants into the air, she said, noting the increase in asthma rates in drilling areas. Marcellus wastes returning to the surface bring up radioactive elements and hazardous materials that are created during the drilling process.

Steingraber's son Elijah received a lengthy ovation when he read his letter to Governor Cuomo. "Trucks make roads unsafe for us to ride our bikes," he said. "They make the air smoggy, and I have asthma." Cuomo's responding letter complimented Elijah on his interest in government and encouraged him to pursue his passions.

"I would like the governor to know that my passion is to ban fracking," Elijah said. "Also, I don't want a job in the gas industry."

Andi Gladstone, a Danby resident and cancer survivor, addressed concerns that fracking could increase risk for cancer. More than 25 percent of the chemicals used in fracking are demonstrated to cause cancer and mutations, she said. Over 37 percent are endocrine disruptors, hormone-mimicking chemicals that are known to cause breast cancer, prostate cancer and more. She noted that women living near drilling areas in Texas have a higher rate of breast cancer than women living in other parts of the state.

DEC's commissioned study on social impacts drew heavy criticism as well. Krys Cail, chair of the gas drilling committee for Northeast Organic Farming Association of NY (NOFA-NY), said that the economic study focused only on potential benefits. They didn't look at any of the negative impacts, she said. A five-acre well pad can't be restored to organic standards. "It's simply not true that there is no trade-off between gas and food," she said.

Jan Quarles works a 63-acre organic grain farm in Ovid and has organized wine events for local wineries. The economic study says there will be lots of jobs, she said. After doing the math it comes to 1080 jobs/year. But we stand to lose 56,000 tourism-related jobs, Quarles countered. "Why should we trade our green healthy economy for one that pollutes?"

Tompkins County legislator Nathan Shinagawa, who works in Bradford County, PA, has seen little economic benefit for the vast majority of residents. Traffic has become a big issue, with some people seeing their usual ten-minute commute stretched into an hour drive to work. What economic benefit the region has seen has gone to the big landowners, hotel owners, and those who own camps and other lodging, he said.

As for the others, "it's harming the people who have less." Shinagawa cited recent flood victims as one example. Those who lost their homes still don't have a place to live, he said. "They don't have homes because they can't afford to live anywhere because the rents are so high." In light of economic impacts such as this, Shinagawa asked, how can our government justify the huge environmental risks fracking will bring? Not only does the SGEIS fail to adequately mitigate the risks, it also fails to address air quality, municipal infrastructure, public health, planning, and how regulatory oversight will be funded.

Read the dSGEIS at <http://www.dec.ny.gov/energy/75370.html>; a print copy is available at Candor Free Library.

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To Comment on dSGEIS:

DEC is accepting written comments through January 11. Comments may be submitted via the web at www.dec.ny.gov/energy/76838.html or by mail to: Attn: dSGEIS Comments, New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, 625 Broadway, Albany, NY 12233-6510.

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