
K.E.E.P. the heat on tire plant – Neighbors vow to fight plans for former IP site

Published 08/22/2007

Good intentions aren't enough for Bobbi Dzuricky.

Dzuricky said she lives too close to the old International Paper Co.. site to take company officials' word that the tires-to-energy plant they want to build there won't be an environmental menace.

"It's my home.. It's my neighborhood.. It's my city.. I think I need better assurances than they have given so far," said Dzuricky, an East Sixth Street resident.

Dzuricky said until that comes, she and others are continuing to organize Keep Erie's Environment Protected -- K.E.E.P.. -- a group formed by neighbors and environmental activists to challenge and oppose plans for the plant.

"We are not going away," Dzuricky said.. "We are still mobilizing.. We are in this for the long haul."

Partners in Erie Renewable Energy LLC, the company that wants to build a \$150 million waste-tire-fueled power plant on Erie's lower east side, have recently sought to reassure the community that the plant would be a good deal.

For example, they said a week ago that the plant won't smell, won't have piles of tires, won't billow black smoke and won't leave homes and cars covered with soot.. Meeting with the Erie Times-News Editorial Board, the officials also said the plant will offer 60 good-paying jobs and cheap energy, and will pass muster with state environmental officials.

"We have a commitment to bring good, sensible power generation to the community," said Vic Gatto, project manager and a partner in one of ERE's parent companies -- Boston-based Caletta Renewable Energy.

The plant will run 24 hours a day, seven days a week and consume 30 million tires a year.

Gatto and Erie real estate developer Greg Rubino, an ERE partner, told the Times-News that they presented their plan to Gov. Ed Rendell and Department of Environmental Protection Secretary Kathleen McGinty in January and were encouraged by the meeting.

But local and state environmental activists say they are far from encouraged.

Tim Reim, chairman of the Green Party in Erie County and a K.E.E.P.. organizer, said he doesn't believe ERE can run such a volume of tires through a plant without degrading air quality.

"There is going to be a change in air quality.. Just how bad it is going to be -- that is what we have to find out," said Reim.

Mike Ewall, director of the Philadelphia-based environmental group ActionPA, said the ERE's proposed power plant is on the radar of environmental groups nationwide.

Ewall is to speak at the K.E.E.P.. meeting scheduled for 6:30 p.m.. Monday at the Mount Calvary Church, 2022 East Lake Road.

Ewall said ERE might be able to operate a plant without odors or dust "if they operate it angelically." But he and K.E.E.P.. organizers said they have more fear of microparticle emissions, such as dioxins and other hazardous compounds.

"What you can't see and can't smell can be the most threatening things," he said.

Rubino said the company cannot comment on technical issues yet because it is still selecting a vendor for the technology that will be used at the plant.

Rubino said once that selection is made, details will be outlined when the company submits air quality permits to the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection.

The company hopes to do that by Dec. 1, but opponents are already raising questions about whether DEP has the capacity and ability to adequately evaluate and monitor the new technology.. Some also question whether the DEP will consider only the environmental merits.

"If you look at the track record of DEP, they are not objective about this at all," Ewall said.. "DEP has an agenda, and their agenda has been to promote" these developments.

But DEP spokeswoman Freda Tarbell pledged the agency would review and judge the project on its merits.. She said federal and state laws require an objective review.

"It is going to be a very comprehensive review," she said.. "We are going to be holding public sessions and we are going to make good, solid, science-based decisions."

Jim Carroll