Niagara Falls Mulls Going into Wastewater Business

CAROLYN THOMPSON, Associated Press Writer

NIAGARA FALLS, N.Y. (AP) — The city that put Love Canal and Superfund in the environmental lexicon may get back into the business of dealing with toxic waste — this time willingly. It is considering whether to truck in and treat wastewater left over from natural gas drilling.

The economically struggling city in western New York could use the revenue, and the Niagara Falls Water Board says its specialized wastewater treatment plant can handle more business since the decline of the chemical industry it was designed for.

With New York considering allowing natural gas production in its part of the lucrative Marcellus Shale, the water board is examining whether it would make economic sense to become a destination for the byproduct wastewater of the drilling process, called hydraulic fracturing, said Richard Roll, the public benefit corporation's director of technical and regulatory services.

"Since we do have a unique kind of wastewater treatment plant that's very much under-loaded, we're looking into the possibility that, with the addition of other treatment processes, maybe our plant would be much more amenable to accepting this waste than your typical municipal biological plant," he said.

Many have criticized the idea, including former Love Canal resident Lois Gibbs, who became a national voice for environmental health. She said she wondered if city

officials would ever learn.

"They're moving away from the chemical industry because the chemical industry is moving away from them, and it's time to start a new economy," Gibbs said by phone Thursday from Falls Church, Va., where she's executive director of the Center for Health, Environment & Justice. "And the new economy is certainly not taking chemical waste."

Fracking forces millions of gallons of water, mixed with sand and chemicals, deep into shale formations beneath Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio, West Virginia, Texas and other states. Its use has increased dramatically in recent years, raising concerns about the potential impact on water quality. Critics say fracking could poison water supplies, while the natural gas industry says it's been used safely for decades.

Liquid that comes out of the drilling wells is highly salty and contaminated with substances such as barium, strontium and radium and other things that can be damaging to the environment. Millions of barrels of wastewater must be treated, and municipal sewage treatment plants can't remove contaminants as efficiently as some of the treatment facilities that specialize in oil and gas industry waste.

The Environmental Protection Agency announced Thursday that it will draft standards for wastewater that drillers would have to meet before sending it to treatment plants.

In Niagara Falls, environmental groups and others say importing chemical-laden waste should be the last thing Niagara Falls should consider, given its experience with the Love Canal environmental disaster. An entire neighborhood was emptied in the 1970s after toxins dumped by Hooker Chemicals and Plastics Corp. into an abandoned canal in the 1940s and '50s were found to have seeped into basements and backyards, creating panic over birth defects and cancer. President Jimmy Carter declared a federal emergency in 1978, and in 1980 the Superfund cleanup act was born.

Once treated, the fracking wastewater, to be brought in by truck or rail, would either be discharged into the Niagara River upstream of Niagara Falls or be reused in drilling, Roll said. The Niagara River flows between lakes Erie and Ontario, forming a border between western New York and Ontario, Canada.

A coalition of local opponents submitted 25 questions to the water board, and about 15 members attended a board meeting Thursday night hoping for answers about the potential environmental impacts to the river and adjoining lakes, costs, safety, possible impacts on human health and the handling of radiation brought to the surface from deep shale wells.

"We should be learning from past mistakes instead of risking our water so we can accept New York state's hydrofracking waste," said Rita Yelda, an organizer for Food & Water Watch, an environmental advocacy group.

"Niagara Falls is known for its tourism, its beautiful scenery," Yelda said. "A large part of their revenue is tourism, people coming in to see Niagara Falls. How will that be impacted by the increased truck traffic and what they're releasing into Niagara Falls?"

The Council on Canadians, a social justice advocacy group, also is among those pushing Niagara Falls to scrap the idea.

"Last year the (United Nations) passed two resolutions recognizing water as a human right, and this proposal to treat fracking fluids threatens people's human right to safe and clean drinking water," the Ottawa-based group said in a Sept. 22 letter to the water board.

The board took no action Thursday.

Earlier in the day, Roll stressed the board is only just beginning to research feasibility testing, regulatory requirements and potential revenue "to make sure it's not just workable but it makes sense for everyone to participate."

The Niagara Falls treatment plant was designed to handle waste from the city's once booming industrial base of electrochemical, organic chemical, ceramics and electrometallurgical plants, Roll said. It already processes imported landfill leachate from three customers that bring the waste by truck, he said.

"We've been developing that trade for the past 15 years or so, and that has had the same effect," he said. "It's unused capacity that is sitting there waiting to be taken advantage of, and we have a duty to try to make our utility as economically viable as possible for everyone."

New York environmental regulators last month formally issued proposed regulations for hydraulic fracturing in the Marcellus Shale and scheduled four public hearings. The state hasn't allowed fracking since it began drafting new permitting rules three years ago.

In neighboring Pennsylvania, nearly 4,000 wells have been drilled in the past few years and tens of thousands more are planned.

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