Hearing for coal-gasification plant fosters debate

The Associated Press

Opponents of a proposed $2.65 billion coal-gasification plant are warning that it will harm regional air quality, while supporters say the Ohio River project may bring thousands of new construction jobs to southern Indiana.

Both viewpoints were expressed during a public hearing that attracted about 200 people Wednesday night to South Spencer High School in Rockport — the plant's proposed site about 30 miles east of Evansville.

The hearing was hosted by the Indiana Department of Environmental Management, which must approve an air permit for the project that would turn coal and petroleum coke into pipeline-quality substitute natural gas and liquefied carbon dioxide.

In November, the Indiana Utility Regulatory Commission approved another state agency's 30-year contract to buy synthetic natural gas from the plant. Gov. Mitch Daniels has said the deal would lock in low rates for Indiana's natural gas users.

The Evansville Courier & Press reported Wednesday (http://bit.ly/A6D4nt) that several labor union officials spoke in favor of the plant, saying it would create new jobs in what they called the most environmentally friendly way feasible.

Another supporter was Ferman Yearby, the president of the Rockport City Council, which passed a resolution supporting the plant.

"When the rubber hits the road, this is about jobs," Yearby said during the hearing.

Indiana Gasification LLC, a subsidiary of New York-based investment firm Leucadia Corp., will build and operate the plant.

Yearby said construction jobs alone could number in the thousands, and many of those workers could buy homes in the area for jobs that could last as long as four years.

"That will indirectly create many associated jobs within our community," he said after the hearing. "Once the (facility) is built, you're going to have at least 300, maybe 400, permanent jobs, and these are $75,000-a-year jobs."

Opponents said Wednesday they value economic development and new jobs, but not at the cost of harming the environment by the questionable use of coal.

Ryan Zaricki, a North American Board of Certified Energy Practitioners-certified solar thermal installer based in Wadesville, Ind., pointed to what he called a hard reality.

"The coal that we dig out of the ground, no matter how we process it, no matter how we turn that rock into power, it has the same elements coming out of the ground and going into the air no matter what the process is," said Zaricki, a Rockport native.

Wendell Hibdon, business manager for Plumbers and Steamfitters U.A. Local 136, said environmental perfection isn't possible or practical.

"There's no such thing as clean coal, I agree — but there is cleaner coal," Hibdon said.

But Owensboro Ky., resident James Lacy Kamuf, who said he is a former power plant pollution-monitoring engineer, questioned why Indiana doesn't have a proposed solar and wind-powered electric generation plant.

"People are saying you can't do solar, but look at Germany. They're leading the way," Kamuf said.

IDEM has drafted a roughly 800-page air permit for the project, but environmental permits aren't the only hurdle. The developers have sought a federal construction loan guarantee from the U.S. Department of Energy, but it hasn't yet been approved.

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