

Residents of Decimated Coal Town Lose Appeal

the Associated Press

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) — Residents of a central Pennsylvania coal town decimated by a half-century-old mine fire have lost a state court appeal to try to prevent condemnation of their land, but the long-running case will continue in federal court.

The Commonwealth Court rejected arguments by seven Centralia property owners who say condemnation is no longer needed because the underground fire has moved and air quality in the borough has improved.

Most homes in Centralia were demolished in the 1980s after the slow-burning fire that began in 1962 at the town dump spread to the underground network of coal mines, threatening residents with poisoning gases and dangerous sinkholes.

The court upheld a 2010 ruling in county court that set fair market value for the properties that the commonwealth began condemning in 1993. The state court ruled Thursday that nothing would authorize a request by the property owners to stop the condemnation on the grounds that the public purpose for it no longer exists.

The property owners, however, have also lodged a civil rights complaint in federal court against the state and other defendants, alleging a conspiracy to steal the mineral rights to billions of dollars' worth of anthracite coal. The suit names the state Department of Community and Economic Development, a law firm, a coal company and the county redevelopment authority. A similar petition in state court was dismissed on jurisdictional and procedural grounds.

A federal judge last year refused to issue an injunction that would have stopped the condemnation.

More than 1,000 residents left and more than 500 homes were knocked down in the relocation program that was largely completed by 1993, when officials invoked eminent domain. Only a handful of people remain in Centralia, resisting the state's efforts to get them to leave.

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