

Drilling opponents struggle with choosing a candidate for governor

Cuomo still mostly quiet on the subject, activists say

By Jon Campbell • jcampbell1@gannett.com • September 26, 2010, 6:30 pm

Andrew Cuomo's stance is too vague.

Carl Paladino? He wants to drill, and the sooner, the better.

With a month-and-a-half to go before [the general](#) election, some activists opposed to drilling for natural gas in the Marcellus Shale are not satisfied with the positions the major party gubernatorial candidates have taken, leaving them without a candidate to fully support.

"The candidates have not taken a sufficient stance. No way, no how, not on any level," said Walter Hang, a database specialist from Ithaca and environmental activist. "It's almost all pabulum. They're all posturing. Some have said some nice things, but that's just not good enough."

Drilling in the gas-rich Marcellus formation has been placed on hold in [New York](#) since July 2008 as the state Department of Environmental Conservation reviews its permitting guidelines for the high-volume hydraulic fracturing process.

While Paladino, the Republican candidate, has said New York should have allowed companies to tap into the Marcellus two years ago, Cuomo has offered a noncommittal stance. A book detailing his energy policy says that "any drilling in the Marcellus Shale must be environmentally sensitive and [safe](#)" and declares existing watersheds "sacrosanct."

Cuomo, the Democratic candidate and current [Attorney General](#), "would not support any drilling that would threaten the state's major sources of drinking water," according to his book.

That's not good enough for Hang, president of environmental database firm Toxics Targeting, and some of his fellow activists. Hang has organized a pair of well-attended protests surrounding recent Cuomo visits to Binghamton and Ithaca, and has sent a letter to the candidate, urging him to provide more detail and help to withdraw the DEC's draft guidelines. He met with Cuomo staff members ahead of his most recent Ithaca visit in August.

"Please spell out precisely how you propose to prevent gas drilling from threatening source water in approximately 75 percent of the Marcellus Shale in New York given that DEC's draft SGEIS would allow drilling in virtually that entire formation," Hang wrote, referring to the permitting guidelines. "I am eager to learn how you would safeguard those 'sacrosanct' areas if you are elected Governor of the State of New York."

Bruce Ferguson, a member of Catskill [Citizens](#) for Safe Energy, called Paladino's stance "unacceptable." But he isn't thrilled with Cuomo's position, either.

"I think, unlike Paladino, Andrew Cuomo is a very intelligent man and a very seasoned politician," Ferguson said. "I think this is a question of educating Andrew Cuomo and making sure he hears our side of things. I don't think there's much point in talking to someone like Paladino; I don't think there would be much of a conversation there."

With a slew of polls showing a lead of varying degrees for Cuomo, there may not be any incentive for him to weigh in on highly polarizing issues, an expert said.

"Cuomo is still taking the role of frontrunner in his position taking. He's being careful to try and not take a position that could be used as a wedge in either direction with groups like the environmentalists," said John McNulty, a Binghamton University political science professor. "Paladino, on the other hand, is taking a go-for-broke strategy; like him or don't like him, he is who he is."

While she is supporting Cuomo, Tompkins County Legislature Chair Martha Robertson, a Democrat who opposes fracking, said she likes the stance Democratic Attorney General candidate Eric Schneiderman has taken. The Manhattan state senator has said he would sue to stop hydrofracking in New York.

"There's not a lot of detail there, but he says he would put the Attorney General's Office behind pressing the issue," Robertson said. "I think there are and have to be better ways to promote economic development in upstate New York. There have to be better ways to enable farmers to make a living, and there are ways to do this."

Schneiderman's stance could be problematic, however, if groups sue to stop the release of the DEC's permitting guidelines and the Attorney General would be forced to represent the department.

Hang said he and others would continue to fight well after the general election.

"We are pushing as hard as we can down the homestretch of the election and the (Gov. David) Paterson administration," Hang said. "Whoever gets elected and takes office in January, in all likelihood they're going to have to deal with this issue, as well."