

Fracking opponents want a say in the state's review of health impacts

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BINGHAMTON — Opponents of hydrofracking in New York are asking for a say in the state's review of its public health impacts.

Binghamton Mayor Matthew T. Ryan and other opponents of natural gas drilling on Tuesday called for formal public participation and other revisions to the New York State Department of Health's review of hydrofracking.

"The problem with that entire proceeding is it is being undertaken completely in secret," said Walter Hang, president of Ithaca-based Toxics Targeting. "There has never been a piece of paper released to the public about the scope of the health review, about how it's being undertaken, about what its critical issues are."

More than 1,000 drilling opponents, including several public officials, have signed on to a letter asking for formal written notice of what the Department of Health's review involves, a minimum of 30 days of written review and comment on the review and at least one public hearing where interested parties can testify about how the review should be conducted.

"If it's ever going to be done in our state, we need to make sure that there's integrity in the process," Ryan said Tuesday.

Not everyone agrees more public comment is necessary at this point in the state's review of fracking, now in its fifth year.

"The public has had plenty of opportunity to comment on all facets of this review for the past five years," said Jim Smith, spokesman for the Independent Oil and Gas Association of New York. "There's not a stone that hasn't been turned over."

Smith said the state's ongoing review of hydrofracking has included all aspects of its potential environment impacts, "so to suggest that human health has not been considered until now is absurd."

The Department of Health began its review of how fracking might impact public health in late 2012 at the request of Department of Environmental Conservation Commissioner Joseph Martens. On Feb. 12, state Health Commissioner Nirav Shah said his analysis of the health impacts of fracking will "require additional time to complete based on the complexity of the issues," and would be completed in a few weeks.