

The Ithaca JOURNAL

November 17, 2009

Natural gas quest: Cayuga Heights won't accept drilling waste

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Cayuga Heights has no plans to accept gas drilling wastewater in the foreseeable future, Mayor Jim Gilmore said Tuesday.

"Not in the near future, and based on what we know today, not even in the distant future. But I think it's a subject we'll probably have to revisit. Probably the industry will force us to," Gilmore said. "Already in the last couple months I've had private entities come to me and talk about processing drill water and I told them we're not in the business of accepting drill water at this time."

The village's wastewater plant, which discharges into Cayuga Lake, began accepting wastewater from conventional gas drilling in May 2008.

The Journal reported the plant was doing so in mid-March, and in early April the village decided to temporarily stop accepting the material pending the results of an analysis on the wastewater plant.

At a meeting of the village trustees Monday, Superintendent of Public Works Brent Cross reported that, because of a paperwork glitch, the village's consultant actually never even began the plant analysis. The village trustees had appropriated \$28,000 to pay Stearns & Wheeler engineers to conduct an analysis on what pollutants and chemicals the plant could accept and treat without damaging plant infrastructure or Cayuga Lake.

Cross suggested the trustees not move forward with the study at this time, because the environmental standards they would have to meet could change pending the state's adoption of environmental regulations on gas drilling in the Marcellus shale.

Because "public sentiment against accepting drill water, horizontal or vertical, is so strong," Gilmore urged the trustees to stop funding the plant analysis as a public signal the village does not plan to accept gas drilling waste. The trustees voted unanimously Monday to end the study.

Wastewater plants, which receive their permits from the state Department of Environmental Conservation, are periodically required to conduct such analyses. In a December 2008 memo, the DEC affirmed that any municipality that wants to accept gas drilling waste must conduct an analysis first; however, a regional DEC engineer in March told the village it was OK to continue accepting the waste, even though the analysis was not complete.

Toxics Targeting President Walter Hang obtained information on the material the village accepted and discovered that the gas drilling waste exceeded pollutant standards established in the village's own law. Levels of copper, lead, "chemical oxygen demand" and "total suspended solids" were all higher in the conventional, vertical gas drilling waste than allowed under village law.

Tuesday, Hang praised the trustees for their decision, saying it "will help safeguard water quality in Cayuga Lake."

He also cited Cayuga Heights' experience as an example of why he believes the state's environmental impact statement on gas drilling should be withdrawn pending further study of existing regulations on gas drilling practices, particularly wastewater disposal.

Gas drilling waste contains high levels of salt, which is difficult or impossible for many wastewater plants to treat, and it can include a variety of chemicals, metals, and even radioactivity.

"This is the linchpin issue for natural gas drilling in New York state," Hang said. The impact statement "simply said, 'Localities, deal with this on your own.' And there really is no way that these localities can handle this drilling wastewater on their own. It really requires the state to step in, require disclosure and proper characterization of the wastewater, come up with a way that this wastewater can be pre-treated and managed properly so that we don't exacerbate our existing water quality problems."