

Guest Column ▶

Commissioners working to help neighbors of GRP plant

Early this past fall, the Georgia Renewable Power Plant (commonly referred to as GRP) began to operate outside Carnesville on Highway 198, following several months of construction.

GRP is a biomass energy facility, and over the last 10-15 years, the plant was recruited and welcomed into Franklin County on the premise that it would operate as a clean wood-burning facility, while boosting the local economy by expanding the tax base and creating jobs.

Wood chips would be burned in large boilers to generate electricity that would then be sold to the power grid.

It was advertised to the county as a safe, clean way to generate electricity, and assurances were extended that it would only burn raw wood.

Promises were also apparently made that the plant would produce no noise or odors or otherwise be offensive to the community.

Once approval was granted, GRP quickly moved to amend their Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD) permit to include permission to burn creosote railroad ties.

The burning of railroad ties containing creosote has a long history of being banned in this and many other countries, because it releases toxic, known carcinogenic compounds into the environment.

However, in 2018, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) classified creosote as a nonhazardous waste product, making it possible for GRP and other biomass facilities to burn creosote-containing railroad ties within their boilers.

The GRP Plant has gone through a months-long process of becoming operational, and according to representatives from the EPD, this commissioning phase should soon be over.

However, this time has been characterized by an excessively high number of shut-down/start-up periods, which are accompanied by extremely loud noises and odors.

Once the plant reaches full continuous operation, it is expected that the sound levels and emissions will stabilize and decrease, hopefully becoming more tolerable.

Representatives from EPD and GRP say that we can then expect only three to four shut-down/start-up periods each year.

Unfortunately, there is no effective regulation of emissions during start-ups. The control equipment that normally monitors emissions cannot operate safely during these times.

Over the last six months or so, the citizens of the Double Churches Community have been exposed to continuous loud noises and extreme odors.

Last fall, an incident involving water runoff from the plant created a fish kill in nearby Indian

Creek. Approximately 2,000 fish were killed along 4.6 miles of Indian Creek in what representatives from EPD called a significant pollution event.

A total die-off of fish along this section of the creek was caused by runoff of water from a smoldering woodpile at the plant.

The resulting black effluent drained into Indian Creek, rapidly lowering dissolved oxygen concentrations and reducing pH to lethal levels.

As part of the ongoing investigation, EPD issued a notice of violation to the GRP plant, and their investigation is expected to conclude within a few months.

Understandably, citizens of the area are extremely worried about their health and safety.

The construction phase was unpleasant enough, with constant noise and truck traffic associated with the industrial scale of the project. But since the plant entered the commissioning phase, the people living nearby have been assaulted day and night with extremely loud noises, noxious odors and even powerful underground vibrations.

With the water pollution event, they are now deeply concerned about the potential for contamination of not only local bodies of water like Indian Creek, but also of the ground water and private wells.

Many residents in that area depend on private wells for their water supply, and they are fearful that their water may already be or will soon become contaminated.

Although the EPD feels that it is unlikely any ongoing water pollution is occurring that will affect well water, it is understandable to say the least that people living in that area are concerned.

None of the original assurances about sound, emissions, and safety made by the company that brought us GRP have so far come to pass.

For months, the Board of Commissioners has listened as person after person came before the board to relate how the operation of the plant has detrimentally affected their quality of life.

The board is very concerned about what has unfolded, and we care deeply about these issues. As we've listened and directly observed what is happening, we've moved to take concrete steps to address the residents' specific grievances and advocate for the abatement of the noise, air, and water pollution produced by the plant.

The following are some of the steps we have or are taking:

- In December 2019, based on the voluminous public testimony and firsthand observation, we declared the ongoing air and noise pollution to be a public health emergency and a public nuisance.

We issued a notice of violation to GRP that requires them to abate the pollution within a spe-



Franklin County commissioners have taken several steps to address environmental concerns and complaints from neighbors of the Georgia Renewable Power plant near Carnesville.

cific timeframe. If they fail to meet the standards for air quality and sound levels outlined in the notice, we are prepared to pursue this in Magistrate Court.

We have contracted with an outside company to provide certified measurements of air quality and noise pollution so that we can adequately assess whether or not GRP is meeting the standards we required.

- The county has purchased its own sound meter to monitor sound levels around the plant. Although our measurements won't be able to be used in any court proceedings, they will still give us important timely data about the ongoing noise levels and help guide our responses.

- In response to the public outcry and pressure from the board, GRP has ordered and plans to soon install silencers in an effort to decrease the sound levels, especially during shut-down/start-up phases when the noise seems to be greatest.

We have also asked GRP to try to plan start-ups for during the day, when most people are awake and at work.

Often, start-ups have occurred suddenly in the middle of the night or early morning hours, which has been very disruptive. Although this has continued to an extent, GRP has been receptive to our outreach, and we are trying to cultivate a better relationship with them that will benefit everyone.

- The county reached out to EPD and set up a public forum, where representatives from the Air Protection Branch and the Watershed Protection Branch came and discussed the specific steps EPD is taking to address

citizens' complaints about the GRP facility.

We have tried to facilitate direct citizen contact with EPD so that the community is kept informed on GRP's permit renewal process for water and air emissions.

The county is expecting to host a public hearing by EPD on GRP's pending permit renewals later this year. We also learned that EPD has placed a cap of 20 percent on the amount of creosote railroad ties that can be burned by the plant.

At the public forum, EPD representatives also expressed a willingness to consider using the permitting process to address noise levels on our behalf. This would have to be something they negotiate with GRP, as they don't necessarily have specific regulatory authority to unilaterally require it.

- We recently approved the purchase of air quality monitoring devices to help the county monitor air pollution in the Double Churches Community beyond the initial notice of violation period.

The GRP plant may be with us for a long time, and it is important to continue to hold them accountable for air, water, and noise quality standards. If we detect violations of air quality standards, we will immediately turn our data over to EPD to investigate, and EPD has agreed to follow-up.

- The board committed to extending water infrastructure into the Double Churches Community beyond what currently exists so that eventually residents have another dependable supply of water available. This is a long-term commitment, because it will take time for this to be implement-

the zoning ordinance of Franklin County.

Proposals for this committee to consider include creating a tiered classification system for industries, with increasingly stricter requirements for moderate and heavy industries.

Heavy industries should be banned altogether or limited to large, well-developed industrial parks that are located as far away from residential, agricultural, and municipal areas as reasonably possible.

Prior to approval, heavy industries should also be required to submit environmental studies assessing the impact of their operation on the local community. We do not want to see a repeat of what has happened with GRP.

As part of this revision, we are also contemplating requiring that all industrial uses be considered conditional uses.

This is important because currently, industries that move to areas that are already zoned industrial don't have to obtain prior board approval except in limited circumstances. By declaring all industrial uses conditional, the board will always have the final say in what industries locate in Franklin County.

- The board is actively trying to find a way to fund the testing of local private wells.

We understand the fear that citizens, especially in the Double Churches, have for the safety of their water supply, but unfortunately it is not legal for the county to pay for testing private wells.

This is frustrating for all involved, and we are trying to help citizens connect with the local extension service to have their wells tested as economically as possible.

We are also working to find DNR/EPD programs that could carry out some well testing at potentially no cost to residents.

The entire Board of Commissioners is committed to finding solutions to the problems created by the GRP Plant.

In retrospect, I don't believe there is a single board member who, if given the opportunity, wouldn't go back and try to reverse the decisions made over the last decade to allow GRP into our community to begin with.

Hindsight is always greatest and easiest in these matters, and we are where we are.

But the county is working at a determined pace to alleviate all the concerns of the citizens affected by GRP.

Now that the plant is here, we will do our best to ensure they operate in as safe a manner with as little long-term impact as possible on the citizens and their health, safety, and well-being.

Equally as important, we are determined to prevent this type of facility from locating here in Franklin County ever again.

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