

Lexington Leader:

Contentious or Reasonable; End Goal = Win-Win for All

December 18, 2024

The courtroom at the Lee County District Court Building in Giddings was filled to capacity last Monday morning as Lee County Commissioners' Court met in a special session to consider a resolution penned by Move the Gas Plant, a group of folks from the Blue community, along with some from Bastrop County, opposing Sandow Lake Ranch Energy's (SLR) intent to build a 1,200 megawatt natural gas power plant in their neighborhood. More than 20 people spoke in support of the Resolution that was intended to convince SLR to move the building site from Lee County into Milam County at the old Alcoa site or to convince them to scrap the project all together. Only two people spoke against approving the resolution.

Lee County Judge Frank Malinak, III, opened the meeting saying, "Several months ago, we learned that a developer had bought the 33,000 acre tract of land that was Alcoa, one third of which is in Lee County.

Some time later, we learned about the natural gas plant they intended to build on part of that land, specifically at CR 309 and CR 312. Immediately, Commissioner Alan Turner (Pct. 3) and I asked SLR to move the location and we called Texas Senator Lois Kolkhorst and Representative Stan Gerdes, asking them to get involved. We did not think the location SLR had picked was the best place, given its proximity to the Blue and Adina communities.

"The more we learned about the situation, we knew we wanted a public hearing in front of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) in Lee County. Before SLR was granted any permit to forge ahead, we wanted TCEQ to come and listen to all sides, including those of folks in Blue, the County and SLR."

In addition to his first reaction to the news of the project, Judge Malinak said he wanted to study and know what to expect from such a huge project, especially emissions from potential pollution and other concerns. He learned that the plant was expected to be a state-of-the-art facility and, as a natural gas project, would be the cleanest of all forms of electricity, except for nuclear.

"I'm sure many here remember that Alcoa's power was fueled by lignite, which was not clean," Judge Malinak said. "The building and operation of this plant will be regulated by the TCEQ, which

receives authority from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the federal arm that oversees the safety and well being of many types of industries, like electric.

Judge Malinak said, “We are concerned about the negatives that may come with a project like this one, such as pollution [all kinds, air, noise, light], increased traffic on our roads, decreased property values as feared by some people who live in the Blue area, having an unsightly power plant in your neighborhood, not to mention what else may be coming down the pike as a result of building this plant. I read that SLR mentioned this as being Power Plant #1, which tells me they may be planning to build another one. That made me wonder where that one would be located? We simply don’t know what’s in the future.”

He continued, “TCEQ will be primarily concerned with the health and safety of our people, not on property values or roads or what other industry might follow the building of that plant. We have heard that data centers, specifically crypto in nature, which take huge amounts of electricity, often follow installations of such power plants. Since the production of crypto currency requires so much electricity, having access to energy close at hand is a plus for that industry.”

In February 2021, ERCOT, which ensures reliable electric service for 90% of the state of Texas and continues to set new records as demand grows, said they came within 4 minutes and a few seconds of losing all electricity in the state during Winter Storm Uri. Judge Malinak said, “Imagine that! Think about the impact on our entire state if our electric grid goes down completely. So the Texas Legislature gave the mandate for ERCOT to shore up our electric grid, which is one reason we are looking at this new power plant in our back yard.”

Judge Malinak and Commissioner Turner took a tour of a similar type power plant in operation in the rural area around Temple. They learned the difference between that plant and the SLR one is that the Temple plant is water cooled and the SLR one is slated to be air cooled. That difference may not only be the amount of water needed to produce energy, but other facts, including noise pollution. Judge said, “When we went inside the [Temple] plant, it was very noisy, but when we went outside, there was very little noise. The facility was very clean and in the control room there were screens all over the place monitoring all kinds of things. The plant has scrubbers that take out dangerous chemicals and fine particles produced in the production of electricity. These chemicals and particles are monitored continually, measuring the air quality and making sure the scrubbers are working like they are supposed to. Because we were told that power plants produce ‘a lot’ of carbon dioxide, we wondered what that means, ‘a lot,’ so we hired a consultant to tell us what that means.”

Commissioner Turner and Judge Malinak both think the proposed gas plant should not be built where SLR is wanting to build it. But that doesn’t mean they want the entire project killed. Judge said, “For those here who don’t like us [the county] spending money on consultants, I want y’all to

know it has been our position from day one to look out for what's best for you and all of Lee County. The consultant has been hired to help us mitigate any problems that may arise, for you and for us," he said speaking to the crowd in the courtroom. "As Chief Operating Officer of our county, it is my job to look out for all of us. I am sick of big cities coming in here and taking or using our resources from which we get not one cent benefit in property tax or road improvements. Right now, if we can convince SLR to move the power plant a short distance away from where they are currently planning to build it, away from the homes of our residents, but keep it in Lee County, we could gain much needed property tax to help pay for roads, our schools or for fire trucks and the like."

He continued, "I don't want this plant built where SLR says they are going to build it any more than you do," he said, speaking to the Move the Gas Plant contingent in the courthouse. "The County wants to be a partner, not an adversary."

"As I see it, if the Court signs your Resolution as it is written, we have two options: move it or kill it. I can almost guarantee you SLR will not move the plant to your suggested site back in Milam County at the old Alcoa sight, but they might consider keeping it in Lee County and moving it deeper into the 11,000 acres that is in Lee County, further away from residents. If they kill the project, and I don't think they will, we have lost an opportunity. If the resolution we are considering today doesn't pass, I want to see the Lee County Commissioners' Court along with Move the Gas Plant get together to come up with a new resolution."

After almost two hours of discussion, Commissioner Turner moved to table the discussion until he and Judge Malinak can meet with representatives from Move the Gas Plant to come up with another resolution that would be more reasonable for all concerned. Commissioner Steven Knobloch seconded the motion.

Some of the discussion was contentious. Some was not. But, all together, it was resourceful and hopefully will bring about results that, in the Judge's words, "will be a win win for everyone."