



November 22, 2024

For Immediate Release

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Blue Residents Say County Gas Plant Study Is Not Needed, Waste of Taxpayer Dollars

Lexington, TX – A county-funded study of the impacts of a proposed natural gas power plant in north Lee County is unnecessary and would be a waste of taxpayer dollars, say a group of Blue residents opposed to the plant in their community.

At its Oct. 28 meeting, the Lee County commissioners court approved a request by county judge Frank Malinak to spend up to \$25,000 to hire an environmental engineering consultant to conduct the study.

Besides questioning the need and cost of such a study, members of the Move the Gas Plant group (MTGP) also questioned Malinak's motivation for seeking the study.

"It's clear to us that Judge Malinak wants the gas plant built in Lee County because of the expected new tax revenue it would bring in," said Travis Brown, a member of MTGP. "We believe this study would be just another justification for the county not taking a stand against the gas plant."

Brown said the county should at least remain neutral on the issue rather than actively opposing MTGP.

He also said the MTGP group does not fear the results of an objective and comprehensive study, but question whether any study funded by the county, and possibly influenced by Sandow Lakes Ranch, would be truly objective and comprehensive.

Sandow Lakes Energy (SLE) has proposed building a 1,200-megawatt power generation plant near the intersection of CR 309 and CR 312. If built, the plant would be among the largest such plants in Texas.

Opponents of the plant being built in Blue say it would dramatically alter the rural nature of the Blue community and result in decreased property values, harmful air pollution and other negative impacts.

Almost 100 homes are located within a mile and half of the proposed plant, according to an air permit application filed by Sandow Lakes Energy with the state. Both the River View Christian Academy, a school for girls, and the historic Adina Christian Church are located within 3,000 feet of the proposed plant

As quoted in a news story about the Oct. 28 court meeting, Malinak told commissioners, “We’ve got SLR (Sandow Lakes Ranch) on one side and Move the Gas Plant on the other. We’re in the middle. One side perceives it’s going to be a good thing, and the other perceives it’s going to be a bad thing – that’s the issue.”

He also said, “We just want somebody to tell us if this is something we need to be concerned about.”

Brown said, “You don’t need a study to know this is ‘something to be concerned about’. Common sense tells you this huge industrial facility does not belong in the Blue community. Especially when Sandow Lakes Energy could and should move the plant to the old Alcoa industrial site, fifteen miles away and without any nearby neighborhoods.”

Brown said he is concerned Malinak wants a study with results that will help bolster Sandow Lakes Energy’s effort to get an air emission permit from the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

In seeking the study, Malinak also told commissioners, “An independent scientist

could give us some information on whether this is going to be a really dirty plant, a cleanly run plant, or what have you.”

Brown said the company’s permit application shows the amounts of pollution it will emit, and there is plenty of independent data regarding the harmful health impacts of air pollution from natural gas power plants.

SLE’s permit application projects the plant will emit tons of pollutants annually that adversely affect human health.

Brown said the almost four million tons of carbon dioxide that would be emitted equals the exhaust from more than 900,000 vehicles.

“But even if this gas plant emitted zero air pollution, which it won’t, it still would have a tremendous negative impact on quality of life and property values in our community,” he said. “And it’s likely Sandow Lakes Ranch will be siting even more industrial facilities near this power source.”

The permit application is currently under technical review by TCEQ staff. It’s expected the TCEQ will hold a public meeting on the application in Lexington, where members of the public and elected officials can make comments and ask questions of TCEQ and Sandow Lakes Energy.

Move the Gas Plant has retained an Austin law firm and has requested an administrative law hearing be held over the company’s permit application.

In August, MTGP submitted a resolution to Malinak and requested it be placed on a court agenda.

If adopted, the resolution would oppose locating the gas plant in Blue and request Sandow Lakes Energy instead locate its plant at the site of the now-closed Alcoa aluminum smelter and coal plants in nearby Milam County.

So far, Malinak has refused to place the resolution on an agenda and has suggested he might prepare his own resolution for the court to consider.

In a letter she sent to Malinak this week, Blue resident and member of MTGP

Michele Gangnes said, “I believe you are on the wrong track if the county engages in its own environmental study at the expense of scarce county funds. It appears to be another thinly disguised effort to pronounce the gas plant a ‘win-win’ for the county and residents of Blue.”

Malinak has said in news stories that the gas plant could be a win for the entire county, including Blue, if the taxes collected from the gas plant reduced county property taxes.

In her letter, Gangnes also wrote, “No one needs a study to know that tons of pollutants, with known health effects *regardless of whether regulatory emissions limits are exceeded*, will be released into a populated area for no reason other than unreasonableness on the part of SLE/SLR to relocate to a more remote portion of its 33,000+ acres.”

Gangnes also pointed out that Blue opponents to the plant were more concerned about the impacts of the gas plant on their families’ lives than any promised tax reductions.

While the proposed resolution is non-binding – it’s not in the county’s power to stop the power plant – Brown said it could prove helpful to efforts being launched by Move the Gas Plant.

Malinak has said property restrictions imposed when Xebec, a Dallas-based real estate company, bought Sandow Lakes Ranch in 2021 prevent a power plant from being built there.

Brown said that if such restrictions exist, then it likely would not apply to the entire 33,000-acre Sandow Lakes Ranch, most of which lies in Milam County.

“And if such property restrictions exist, there are ways those can be changed,” he said.

Brown said those wanting to learn more should go to the group’s website: www.movethegasplant.org

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