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Gas power plant welcome, different locale requested

Opposing sides not thrilled with county's position

Lee County has finally taken an official stance on the natural gas power plant slated to be built in the community of Blue. In short, the county welcomes the plant, but asks that its developer consider a location other than Blue.

The plant is being developed by Sandow Lakes Energy (SLE), and is to be built on land known as Sandow Lakes Ranch (SLR) -- formerly occupied by Alcoa.

A citizens group known as Move the Gas Plant has been working since July 2024 to get the plant moved someplace else. Their first preference was on SLR property in Milam County.

MTGP's reasons are extensive, ranging from air pollution to the disruption of their rural way of life.

However, it was made clear in a December meeting of the commissioners court that Lee County did view the plant as being beneficial for the county, particularly in the form of tax revenue. If it were built just over the line in Milam County, Lee County would still suffer road damages and potential pollution, but not receive any benefits.

MTGP acquiesced and left that meeting with the belief that most everyone agreed the plant should be in Lee County, but definitely someplace else on SLR land other than Blue.

In the time between the December meeting and now, a second citizens group called "Powering Lee County's Future" has formed. This new group not only fully supports the plant, but also would like to see it built as soon as possible.

Both groups had submitted revised resolution language to County Judge Frank Malinak for consideration.

County Attorney Martin Placke ended up writing the resolution that was ultimately adopted by using

elements supplied by both groups.

Resolution

The resolution's concluding statement reads, "The Commissioner's Court hereby recognizes the economic and infrastructure benefits that the Sandow Lakes Energy natural gas power plant will bring to the county, but requests Sandow Lakes Energy to consider economically feasible alternative locations within Sandow Lakes Ranch, but farther away from residential properties in the Blue/Adina community and within Lee County for its proposed natural gas power plant."

Doesn't do enough

MTGP representatives Travis Brown and Michele Gangnes told the court the resolution doesn't do enough to formerly oppose the location in Blue. "It's confusing, unclear, and weak," Brown said bluntly.

Gangnes compared the resolution's language to what her niece calls a "nothing burger."

She noted the resolution contained several "whereas" clauses that stated putting the plant in Blue would be a terrible disruption to the quiet rural nature of the community by bringing increased noise, lights, traffic, and water impacts, as well as decreased market values of nearby homes.

"The resolution doesn't even make sense with the inclusion of 11 recitals on why the Blue site is not appropriate, but with no stated actual opposition to the location," Gangnes stated. "You may as well adopt nothing because that's what this offers -- nothing but deference to SLR. It's a signal that you are okay with putting the plant in the midst of all these people and forcing them to choose a future they don't want -- to either live totally differently and put up with this behemoth in their midst, or move away from the economic, emotional, and in some cases, family legacy attachments they have for their property."

"Why not just say you oppose it being in Blue and show your constituents some respect?" Gangnes added.

Alternate locations

Brown handed out three professionally-produced maps showing three alternate locations where the plant could be built on SLR property within Lee County, but out of the immediate impact of Blue residents, Adina Church, and River View Christian Academy. One example had it just a mile up the road.

MTGP's preferred alternate location has the plant near the county line, and with only two houses in a 1.5-mile radius being possibly affected -- as opposed to the scores of homes in the original location. This location would require a 6.8-mile extension of the natural gas pipeline.

“I think these would satisfy the county and us,” said Brown of all three alternate locations. “There would be tax benefits, and less damage to homes.”

Judge Malinak asked Brown if he had shared any of the alternate location maps with Sandow Lakes Ranch/Energy. Brown replied that he had not.

Resolution defense

In defending his version of the resolution, Placke said he believed it aligned with what commissioners had said during the earlier meetings.

Public favor

Ed Johnson, who represented the Powering Lee County’s Future group, was also non-plussed with the resolution. “Every citizen I’ve talked to is concerned about the power grid and wants to see things fixed,” he told the court. “This new resolution contradicts this.”

The future power group has reportedly been making public presentations promoting the plant to various local civic organizations, such as the Lions Clubs. “I will tell you all the members there want to see this power plant built,” Johnson said.

Johnson explained that one of the main fears folks have is another freeze like that occurred in 2021 where electricity was out for several days. “There were 250 residents in Texas that died because of lack of power in the freeze,” he said. “It should be one of our top priorities to fix our grid so we can have power if we have another winter storm or summer heat wave, so that the citizens of Lee County are not jeopardized. The nursing homes here in Lee County all went without power, trying to take care of those residents. Thank goodness no one perished there, but it was close.”

Too late to move

As previously reported, SLE has already submitted permit applications to the TCEQ with the model being in the proposed Blue location, which is at the intersection of County Roads 309 and 312.

Johnson said getting SLE to move the plant isn’t a reality. “They’d have to start from scratch,” he explained. “That would significantly delay the plant.”

“They have spent a year and a half working on the plans for this power company, and if they were to move it one inch, they’d have to start all over,” he noted. “That would be a year and a half that you’re going to put into the timeline of building a new power plant for the citizens of Lee County. I think that is a very dangerous situation.”

He also added that SLE’s alternate location is indeed in Milam County, which would eliminate any tangible benefits for Lee County.

Worse pollutants

“This is one of the safest and cleanest power plants on the market for gas power plants, and it would be a great opportunity for Lee County to have this built,” Johnson told the court.

Johnson added that the Cargill plant in Giddings currently makes more noise than what the power plant would make. “There’s a gas oil well plant here on Hwy 77 about 3 miles north of town that’s flaring all the time,” he noted. “The pollutants that flare are more dangerous than this power plant. Are y’all going to do a resolution against Cargill for too much noise? Are you all making resolutions against oil companies here to stop flaring?”

State supporters

Commissioner Steven Knobloch noted that Governor Greg Abbott, State Senator Lois Kolkhorst, and State Representative Stan Gerdes have all gone on record with positive comments about the gas plant being built in Lee County. “They are for this thing, for the future of our region, and for all Texans,” he said.

Must work with SLR

Commissioner Alan Turner, in whose precinct the plant would be built, told the court he’s made his decision. “I’ve been accused of being on the side of SLR/SLE, and that’s B.S.,” he said. “I’ve got to work with them, and we’ve got to work with them at some point, without a doubt.”

“It’s gonna go there most likely -- 99.9% chance,” he said of it being built in Blue. “It doesn’t mean I gotta like it, or Michele and Travis gotta like it. But I’ve had more calls from the ‘Put the Plant’ than I have from ‘Move the Plant’ -- just this weekend.”

“If we try to force them to move it, they’re not going to move it, and then they don’t work with us at all,” said Turner. “Then I can’t mitigate any roads. I can’t keep them off my roads. We can’t do any of that if we just force it. I would like to work with them, but not until they start working with me.”

Population at odds

Turner concluded that if the court took a hardline stance on the plant, it would likely get very ugly between county residents. “If all the MTGP people start coming, and all the Future Power people start coming, we’ll have a room full of people, and we’re going to divide the whole darn county,” he said. “We’re going to divide the precincts in the county, and we all can probably agree that nobody’s going to win in that deal. We can’t divide our people like that.”

Judge Malinak concurred. “Alan’s right -- this resolution situation has divided our county,” he said. “There’s a conflict between MTGP and SLR. I don’t know what the history is between the two groups, but it isn’t good, and it puts the county in an impossible position. We want to do what’s right for the

people.”

Can't stop progress

Malinak said that no matter where the plant is built, somebody will be adversely affected. “The residents in Blue are going to bear the brunt of this,” he said. “I hate that, but it’s just like when we get the bypass -- whenever that happens here in Giddings, we’re going to have residents, unfortunately, who are going to bear the brunt of that. And that’s just progress. I don’t know whether that’s good or bad. That’s just the life as we live right now. We can’t control it. I have always looked for a win-win situation in respect to everybody.”

Future engineers

Malinak added that the gas plant, which will contain the highest levels of technology, could have unforeseen benefits. “If we get a plant like that in operation, it’s going to be one of the stops for our school field trips,” he said. “I’m thinking that’s a good thing. I want our schools to be partnered with them, because the name of the game in today’s world is Math, Science, and Technology. And I hope it will inspire some of our high school kids to take up an interest in science and technology, and go on to college, get an engineering degree, and do great things.”

Keeping watch

“If they build it and start producing energy, then yes, I want to work with them,” said Malinak. “But I also just don’t want to blindly work with them. I want to see that our federal and state agencies are going to make sure they’re doing what they’re supposed to be doing.”

Unanimous choice

In the end, Turner moved for Placke’s version of the resolution to be adopted as-is. Knobloch seconded the motion.

It was adopted unanimously. Commissioner Richard Wagner was absent from the proceedings.