

Byron station response committee updates progress on stopping plant's closure

'I remain cautiously optimistic. But I don't take anything for granted'

By [Jeff Helfrich](#)



The Byron Exelon Generating Station is planned to close in September of 2021. (Michael Krabbenhoeft/mkrabbenhoeft@saukvalley.com)

BYRON – The Byron Station Response Committee has been working since last September to prevent the planned closure of the Byron Nuclear Plant, owned and operated by Exelon Generation.

The committee, made up of Ogle County organization representatives impacted by the potential loss of the plant and its tax dollars, is headed up by Byron School District Superintendent Buster Barton and School District President Christine Lynde.

The Byron School District received just over \$19.1 million in real estate taxes from the plant last year.

In addition to the school district, taxes from the plant also go to Ogle County, Rockvale Township, the Byron Fire District, Rock Valley College, the Byron Public Library District, the Byron Museum District, the Byron Forest Preserve District, the Oregon School District, the Oregon Park District, and Kishwaukee Community College.

SaveInuclearpower.com has been established as the organization's hub for information and how to get involved in keeping Byron's, as well as Dresden's plant in Morris, open. The committee has met with local civic organizations, held virtual town halls, and worked with local taxing bodies.

"There are so many factors to help move legislation forward,"

Barton said. "Make a video, order a sign, donate to signs. We're trying to inform people and let them know the movers and shakers and legislators. There's template letters and emails. We did an economic impact analysis."

Exelon has said it plans to close both plants in September of this year. The Byron plant has around 700 regular employees. It was licensed to operate for another 20 years. The decision to close it has been "in the works for some time," according to the Aug. 27, 2020 press release.

That release said the two plants face revenue shortfalls in the hundreds of millions of dollars because of declining energy prices and market rules that "allow fossil fuel plants to underbid clean resources".

Exelon has not ruled out keeping the plants open if things change with policymakers. The Byron plant's property value assessment has been under appeal without a decision from the state appeal board since 2012.

Ogle County Assessor Ron Kane told Ogle County Newspapers last year the parties were "about \$300 million apart."

In January 2019, the Ogle County Board of Review lowered the plant's assessment from \$546 million to \$503 million, a 7% decrease, after they heard Exelon's assessment appeal

and arguments against it from attorneys for the Byron School District.

Exelon asked for the assessment to be set at \$188 million, while the school district requested a value of \$625 million.

Barton said legislation to convince Exelon to keep the plants open will have to happen this year. Exelon's finances are being reviewed by the state until April 1, Barton said.

Barton is not sure what potential legislation would look like, and said there are many directions it could take.

"Legislators have been touring the plants," Barton said.

"That's progress. May 31 is when the 102nd general assembly retires. It would be great if it was sooner. We will need to have something this year."

Lynde said the committee has been in contact with nuclear power advocates to let legislators know about impacts of a closure. The group has targeted April 1 to get behind legislation. She says she remains hopeful that a solution will come about to keep the plants open. But the short timeframe before the planned closure makes her "anxious."

"I think it'll be easier to determine when we see what a piece of legislation would look like," Lynde said. "We're trying to keep the troops rallied. We remain hopeful. It's hard to say without legislation. Everyone wants something sustainable."

When this happened in 2016 to some other plants, there was a timeframe on it. We all want something more sustainable without an expiration date."

Working toward keeping the plant open has become "almost a full-time job" for Lynde since September. Barton has had to work on the issue while also navigating COVID-19 as a school superintendent.

"It's been challenging to say the least," Barton said. "Two significant events happening concurrently take an inordinate amount of time, energy and support. Our community keeps stepping up. Staff has been amazing. They've helped us push forward. It's still a team effort."

The Byron School District has also started to prepare for a substantial financial impact if the closures go forward. She said education would look "extremely different" and has looked at every possibility and cut that could happen.

Lynde hopes some negotiating would be done to keep funding, and legislation would need to be tweaked.

"We've taken steps to be proactive," Barton said. "Most time has gone toward keeping it around. We've talked with state officials on funding formulas that would vary. Worst-case scenarios and taking proactive steps while trying to keep it open for many years to come. The plant wouldn't go to zero

overnight. There would still be decommissioning and some revenue."

Lynde said trying to grow the movement during COVID-19 has been a challenge. Supporters can't gather in a theater or in large numbers. The committee has done some outreach and has found a "super supportive" community.

It has also found some that don't realize the seriousness of the potential closure.

"I just want to make sure people understand," Barton said. "Sometimes I don't think people understand the possibility exists. They don't think it could go away. They need to know that."

"We meet with groups and people say Exelon says this all the time," Lynde said. "We lay out the facts and they're surprised. They realize it's serious."

When asked if he believes the plants will remain open past September, Barton remained positive.

"Knowing what I know about nuclear energy and its benefits, I remain cautiously optimistic," Barton said. "But I don't take anything for granted. I know we have work left to do and keep advocating and informing. Nothing is guaranteed. We have work left to do, especially with legislators. There's no crystal ball."

