

Hundreds attend meeting to learn about power company agreement

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BY DENISE MARTIN

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Washington D.C. may be struggling with health care reform and climate change, but the proposed LS Power Electric Station in Lent Township is clearly the most controversial local issue of 2009 and probably will continue to be well into 2010.

Lent Township Board hosted a meeting July 22 to update the public on what Lent town supervisors and the town's attorney have done so far on this proposal, and to also gather suggestions on any conditions that should be included in a development agreement the township will sign, with builder LS Power.

There were 300 folding chairs placed in rows inside the township hall and almost every chair had a body seated in it, while many people stood.

Lent Township's attorney Troy Gilchrist, with Kennedy & Graven told the crowd the meeting is to explain what authority Lent Township has in this electric station permitting process, plus the meeting was called for Lent Township to listen to concerns of residents.

Gilchrist explained that recent legislation giving LS Power a personal property tax exemption is contingent on there being a development agreement.

The agreement must be accepted by all parties, in order for the tax exemption to be effective, which in turn allows this multi-million dollar project to move forward. Gilchrist explained, "Lent Township does not have much to say (in approving the site and permitting a project like this) but the township can require LS Power to mitigate noise and visual impacts," Gilchrist explained.

State agencies have pre-emptive power to determine if this station will be able to pump enough water to meet needs, for instance. The state agencies will decide where this station will discharge waste operations water.

Gilchrist said there have been a few conversations and the draft agreement is being written right now.

He added the township would like the agreement to say LS Power has no plans to use township roads.

Lent also wants the agreement to include requiring LS Power to submit a plan for how it's going to meet state noise level standards. LS Power should show the township a mitigation plan prior to even going to the Public Utilities Commission for a permit.

Lent wants to see lighting details, impose height restrictions, landscaping and setbacks for the plant, all of which it can do under township zoning code.

Exhibit B – Hundreds attend meeting to learn about power company agreement, Chisago County Press, July 30, 2009.

Gilchrist added Lent Township wants to be reimbursed for what it spends reviewing this plan.

Lent Township wants the agreement to remain with the site, even if LS Power leaves the picture.

He said the township hasn't seen a site plan and has very few specifics on what the development will entail. Gilchrist then opened it up to public remarks on what this agreement should address.

Highlights:

Many people took the roaming cordless microphone to speak:

~ Residents said there should be wording in the agreement disallowing this project to "trigger annexation."

~ There should be a large zone designated around the plant site (see graphic of site location). Some wanted this area set aside for tree plantings, as a no build buffer. Others said it should be a special taxing district, giving a break to those most affected by this station.

Dr. Willard Carlson, whose Sunrise Estates is on #14, declared the electric station will reduce property values, negating any monetary benefits in broadening tax base.

~ Another person asked about Public Utilities Commission permit supervisor Robert Cupit, and if he'll remove himself from the LS application review because he's a township supervisor in Fish Lake and, the person stated, too close to the issue as a supervisor.

~ Another citizen asked for restrictions on trucks hauling fuel oil to this plant, a mixed fuels peaking station using natural gas (pipelines right nearby) and fuel oil.

~ A citizen wanted three-D views made available showing the proposed project from various distances.

~ The township must require an emergency response plan, should there be a serious incident or malfunction when the station is operational.

~ A resident said the state takes too long to act when private wells are hurt by industrial uses. The township needs to include "immediate" alternative water supplies to be provided by LS Power to surrounding property owners, in the event of drawdown or contamination of private wells.

LS Power General Manager Blake Wheatley told the audience the project is "still a couple of months away" from having the first test well drilled.

He said it will be next spring before the full maximum pumping test could be performed. In conjunction with the DNR, LS Power will run wells at maximum capacity for 30 days and nearby private wells will be monitored for impact.

Wheatley spoke and answered questions for about 45 minutes.

To one person who compared LS Power to an icon of corporate non-compliance-- Enron-- Wheatley said that is "absolutely false."

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There were comments about long range proposals for new transmission powerlines in Chisago County.

Wheatley said no new lines are part of the station. It will be adjacent to and connect directly into the existing substation in Lent Township, owned by Xcel Energy.

A citizen asked if locals will be able to buy "cheap" power from this plant. Wheatley said to the extent any local providers purchase power contributed to the grid at peaking high demand periods, this will benefit the companies, and in turn benefit customers.

People who demanded an Environmental Impact Statement were told by Wheatley the only difference between the Environmental Assessment process and an EIS is that the latter requires multiple alternative locations to also be reviewed. Natural gas fired plants do not have the environmental impacts of say, coal plants, he added, and the state doesn't make an EIS mandatory for this project.

Lent Town Supervisor Lyle Johnson summed up, saying the Township Board remains "cautiously optimistic" about this plan and it will strive to make the project a "win-win as much as possible."