

No simple answers

Commissioner hits the streets for public opinion

BY MONICA KEEN
STAFF WRITER

District 3 County Commissioner Mike Huff spent two days going door-to-door in two towns. He wasn't campaigning. Huff was asking residents in other towns what they thought about the coal-fired power plants near them.

Huff hit the streets after learning that the Sallisaw Landfill, which is in Huff's district, was the proposed site for a coal-fired power plant and hearing concerns from residents about the proposed plant.

"I try to keep an open mind," Huff said.

With that open mindedness, Huff headed to Muskogee and Chouteau to talk to residents, business owners, school employees, and others and hear what they had to say about the coal-fired power plants in their backyards.

Huff said he has been to the Oklahoma Gas & Electric plant in Muskogee and the Grand River Dam Authority plant in Chouteau.

His canvassing began in Muskogee, where he said he went to the area around the plant and started going door-to-door.

From 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., with a 30-minute break for lunch, Huff talked to business owners, people at churches, school employees and others about the power plant. He even visited a fitness center.



Huff

Huff said he met a college teacher who lives in Broken Arrow who told Huff that he is against all industry, but he enjoys his lights and air conditioning and he even enjoys his car, if government standards are met.

"I'm not saying everyone in Muskogee is for it," Huff quickly pointed out. But the people Huff came across were in favor of their plants.

He isn't stopping with those two towns. When Your TIMES spoke to Huff, he had plans to go to the Panama area to talk with residents about the coal-fired power plant there.

Huff said people told him that the plants pay taxes and pay good wages, something that is needed in Sequoyah County.

He noted that part of the taxes gained from the plant will go into the county's general fund, which could be used to help all county offices.

"That would give us a tremendous boost," Huff said.

'I'm optimistic. I'm looking at it through rose-colored glasses.'

Steve Carter
District No. 2 County Commissioner Steve Carter, on a proposed power plant in Sallisaw.

tax passed by county voters, along with a state motor fuel tax, goes toward road maintenance. But that could even see a boost with the construction of a plant because, Carter said, it will increase the county's sales tax, which will in effect increase the money used to take care of the roads in the county.



Carter

"It's going to help in that respect too," Carter said.

He said currently the county receives \$90,000 a month from the half-cent sales tax for all three commissioners to keep up with road maintenance.

The roads are just half the battle for county commissioners. Every year, except this year, there have been county budget woes with which the commissioners have had to contend.

"This year we were lucky, we had enough money to get by with," Carter said.

With the money crunches that the county has had in the past, Carter said he sees the plant as something positive. He said the extra money would be used to operate the courthouse in the future.

He also sees the increase in ad valorem taxes as a benefit to schools.

"I'm optimistic," Carter said. "I'm looking at it through rose-colored glasses. I don't want to

see any negatives."

Carter isn't new to the power plant business. He worked on power plants, helping construct them for many years. He said in his years of working on plants, he hasn't seen the negative effects that have been mentioned.

Years ago before Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Environmental Quality environmental standards, Carter admitted there were problems. But with the increase in technology and tougher standards, Carter seems to see the benefits rather than the possible negatives.

"There's a lot of benefits," he said. Carter pointed out that the county commissioners don't have a say in the plan for the plant. That is up to the city and state.

"If they want it and we say no, they're still going to get it," Carter said. District 1 County Commissioner Bruce Tabor said the commissioners don't have any call on the Tenaska issue if Sallisaw chooses to sell.

"We can't stop anyone from coming in," Tabor said. He explained that the county doesn't have any zoning and ordinances, and until that is changed they don't have a say so in this plant. A vote of the people would have to be done

in order for the county to have zoning and ordinances, he noted.

"A lot of people (in the county) don't want zoning laws," he said.

Tabor said that he doesn't want anything coming into the county that is going to cause health problems to people. As a county commissioner, he said that he also has to look at the financial health of the county to make sure there is enough money to run all the county offices, such as the sheriff's department.

On the financial side, Tabor said, "We're looking at a great boost to county monies."

But he added, "To sacrifice people's health for this, I wouldn't be in favor."

Tabor said he has received reports from different people, but Tabor has not seen any definite facts proving that this power plant is a health hazard.

"I definitely don't want something to cause damage to the health of my grandchildren, and the future constituents of our county," Tabor said. "It's a two-edged sword."

He said he and other commissioners have spoken to people in different towns in the area that have coal-fired power plants, and those people did not have a problem with the plants.

"Our personal feelings, we have to kind of set aside," he said. "We have to look at every body."

PLANT: Opponents voice concerns

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County, is one of the leaders of the Sequoyah County Clean Air Coalition, which opposes the plant. Weddle points to the possible health problems from pollution emitted from coal-fired power plants.

He said studies have shown that coal dust and other emissions can cause heart and lung problems, not only for humans but for animals as well.

The American Heart Association, he said, has also shown that air pollution causes a number of problems, including heart attacks, and is a contributing factor to heart disease.

Weddle and Jeff Edwards of Roland, an attorney who works for a Fort Smith company and who is also leading the fight against the plant, are also concerned about the addition of another coal-fired power plant in the region.

There are currently coal-fired power plants in operation in Panama and Muskogee, as well as the Tulsa area. Weddle asked about what if all three plants have a bad day and emit more than allowed.

"You have a concentration of these plants in this area of the state," Weddle said. "It becomes a huge cumulative problem."

Edwards is most concerned about mercury emissions from power plants. He said the University of Texas conducted a study of coal power plants in Texas and found that areas around coal plants show a 61 percent increase in autism rates.

He said although a federal mercury emission standards rule has been approved, 16 states are suing the EPA because states want stricter guidelines. The federal rule allows for power companies to buy pollution

credits from other companies, which Edwards said creates hot spots for mercury pollution.

Weddle pointed out that there are other sources of mercury, such as environmental exposure to mercury, but the cumulative effects are what he is concerned about. He said particulates in the air and pollutants from any emissions source can induce arrhythmias, and contribute to heart disease and asthma in all ages.

He said, from his experience, he even notices an increase in the number of patients with chest pains and breathing problems if there is a grass fire.

Weddle believes that more pollution will increase health costs, which will far outweigh the millions expected in taxes from this plant.

Edwards and Weddle both say that a new technology called gasification, which turns coal into a gas that is used for electricity generation, is the better option.

But the men say since the company is not required to build a gasification plant, they are not going to. Tenaska officials have said that gasification technology is still in the experimental stage and has not, as of yet, been used in a large generation plant. Tenaska is involved in a partnership on a coal gasification plant in Illinois, which will be the largest of its kind in the country when completed.

Edwards said when Tenaska says that they will use the best available technology, "Coal is never the best available technology."

Both men say they would even feel better about the project if it was natural-gas fired. Weddle pointed to less long-term environmental problems with natural gas.

While plant officials and others are saying that the landfill site will make it out of sight and out of mind, Weddle said there will still be more train traffic, light and noise pollution, and electricity into and out of the plant.

"How do we know (the current) power lines are big enough?" Weddle questioned.

Weddle said the company won't tell the public where they are selling power and has never been clear about exactly how many jobs will be created. He claims that the company has said that they will not use the power locally, but then said there is a need for more power.

"People don't see the big picture," Weddle said. When the company talks about its track record, the men say that they can't really look at their record because Tenaska builds and operates primarily natural-gas fired plants.

"Tenaska has no experience with coal-fired power plants," Steve Dobbs, the director of facilities and grounds for the University of Arkansas at Fort Smith, said. Dobbs is another local resident opposed to the plant.

Dobbs said while controls have been improved, the state says they do not seek penalties for every excess emission above allotted amounts.

Dobbs said the city is making a big business decision that impacts the whole region.

"The city says they are just the mere landowners," he said. "We all have a responsibility as landowners, even the city."

Dobbs said he thinks people are hearing promises and not weighing out the bottom dollar.

"Why not protect families now and do the right thing?" Dobbs asked.

Company predicts economic boost

Tenaska officials are offering confirmation that the Sallisaw project will have a positive economic impact on the community — in the form of a previous economic study of a plant similar to Sallisaw's.

Company officials said recently that new money will be injected into Sequoyah County during the four-year construction period, creating new jobs and the need for goods and services. When the plant becomes operational, officials say the additional money will continue to grow the economy in terms of economic activity, wages and business profits.

The company offered an economic study of a coal-fired plant similar to Sallisaw's to give a general idea of how much Sequoyah County's economy can grow if a plant is built.

In March 2004, Tenaska officials said the company commissioned a study by a professor of economics at Missouri State University in Springfield to estimate the economic impact of a proposed coal-fueled power plant in southwest Missouri, smaller in scope than the Sallisaw project. The Sallisaw plant is estimated to cost about \$1 billion, compared to the \$730 million construction cost of the Missouri plant.

The larger Sallisaw plant is estimated to require between 4.5 and 5.5 million man-hours to build, while the 550-megawatt Missouri plant was estimated to need around 4.5 million man-hours to construct.

"We estimate the Sallisaw project will employ 70 to 100 full-time workers when it is fully commissioned and will provide about 1,000 jobs at the plant during peak construction periods," Tenaska officials said.

Members of the Sequoyah County Clean Air Coalition have argued that the additional jobs will not be given to local residents, but will instead go to out-of-state workers and workers from outside the county. Coalition members pointed to an article that appeared in May 2003 in The Daily Progress of Charlottesville, Va., which reported that workers allegedly rallied for Tenaska Inc. to hire

more local workers for a plant construction project in Fluvanna County, Virginia.

According to a 2004 press release on Tenaska's Web site, the company reported that operating the 885-megawatt, natural gas-fueled plant created 28 new jobs in Fluvanna County. Tenaska filled 21 of those positions from within the state of Virginia, including nine from Fluvanna or adjacent counties. Tenaska's contractors reportedly hired 560 Virginia construction and trade workers over two years of construction.

The Missouri study estimated the economic impact from construction of the facility and the ongoing impact from jobs during its operation. The study included other estimates and calculated a "multiplier" to determine how the construction and subsequent employment costs at the plant would be re-spent in the county and surrounding area on other goods and services. According to the study, the total economic impact typically runs about 1.5 to 2.5 times the direct spending injection.

In the Missouri study, Tenaska estimated that it would spend \$254.3 million dollars in materials and labor in the state, with 78 percent of that money going to the 24-county area surrounding the plant. It also projected that 58 percent (\$147.6 million) of the state total would be directly put into the county's economy.

"As the Sallisaw project is bigger in scope, this direct injection should be higher than in the Missouri study," Tenaska officials said.

According to the study, after operations it was estimated that 100 employees would earn about \$5 million per year. The study conservatively assumed that 60 percent of the employees would live in the county so \$3 million per year would be put into the county by these employees.

The Missouri study found that employees living and spending in the county resulted in another \$1,846,000 being re-spent, creating about 15 new jobs outside of the plant.

Power customer identity remains under wraps

BY MONICA KEEN
STAFF WRITER

While Tenaska is in the process of deciding whether or not they will build a coal-fired power plant at the Sallisaw Landfill, speculations about to whom Tenaska will be providing power have surfaced.

Tenaska Inc. officials have said that the company is in the process of working with companies that would take the electricity from the Sallisaw plant. According to the report, "In 2004, Tenaska and a partner, GRDA, agreed to study joint development of a coal plant in northeastern Oklahoma. During 2005, progress was made in negotiations with potential customers for the energy the plant would provide."

W.W. "Bill" Braudt Jr., general manager with Tenaska's

business development, has said that the company will sell only wholesale within the region, only selling to utilities. He noted that they are not in competition with retail providers anywhere.

In Tenaska's 2005 annual report, the Grand River Dam Authority (GRDA), which sells wholesale power to the city of Sallisaw, was mentioned as a partner with Tenaska. According to the report, "In 2004, Tenaska and a partner, GRDA, agreed to study joint development of a coal plant in northeastern Oklahoma. During 2005, progress was made in negotiations with potential customers for the energy the plant would provide."

Justin Alberty, GRDA spokesperson, recently said that GRDA did look at a joint project with Tenaska in the northeast corner of the state, but the project is not connected to Tenaska's plans in Sallisaw and is not located in Sequoyah County.

"We don't have any involvement in their efforts down there," Alberty said.

Alberty emphasized that the GRDA has no plans to be a partner or customer of Tenaska's proposed Sallisaw plant.

Alberty pointed out that GRDA has its own coal-fired complex at Chouteau, which is where their main source of power is produced. GRDA also has three hydro-electric facilities on the Grand River.

POLLUTION: State in attainment

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to make sure the state or areas in the state don't exceed those federal levels.

"The state is currently in attainment with all the standards."

According to DEQ data, Sequoyah County is one of the cleanest counties in the

state.

Arthur said the state does not want to violate NAAQ standards because if the state is out of attainment, one of the repercussions could be that the state could have its federal highway money withheld.

He noted that there are areas

in the country that are not in attainment and haven't been for years. He said there is also no "cut and dry" rules when a state is out of attainment. He said states are given the opportunity to take steps to get back in compliance, such as pass more stringent rules.