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Article published Apr 27, 2005

Ethanol plant requires very thorough review

There will be a meeting Thursday in Chambersburg to discuss concerns about a proposed ethanol plant in Cumberland Valley Business Park near Letterkenny Army Depot.

If the session mirrors past meetings, a lot of residents will have questions and concerns about the safety of the plant. Greene and Letterkenny township officials should take the concerns seriously and move slowly when considering the project by Penn-Mar Ethanol.

Because this would be the first ethanol plant in the Northeast, supervisors have a responsibility to investigate fully what needs to be done to ensure the plant, if approved, would operate safely and not be a detriment to the community.

People tend to fear the unknown, so the anxiety felt by neighbors of the proposed plant is normal. There are concerns about accidents, fires, evacuations, pollution, truck traffic, noise, property values and water usage.

In response to these concerns, the developers promise to 1) properly design and construct the facility 2) properly train employees and provide maintenance and 3) be prepared for an accident and emergency response.

It's up to those responsible for granting approval at the local and state levels to make sure those promises are kept if the ethanol project moves forward. At the state level, permits are needed 1) for air emissions 2) for water discharge and 3) for the ethanol storage tanks. Locally, a land development plan will be reviewed, and the zoning board is considering whether to grant height variances.

Overall, ethanol plants have a good safety record, though pollution violations have been a problem at some. There are about 80 plants operating in the United States, mostly in the Midwest.

Penn-Mar Ethanol developers have promised to use the "best available technology" to control odors, dust and vapors, with the state Department of Environmental Protection setting the standards.

However, Penn-Mar Ethanol, the state and the townships should make sure they have satisfactory answers to these questions:

- Are area fire departments prepared to handle a worst-case scenario accident at the plant? Do they have enough manpower and the proper equipment? Are fire departments throughout the region prepared to handle possible chemical spills?
- How much training have area emergency personnel had on liquid ammonia and sulfuric acid, which require the developers to have a 2.5-mile radius evacuation plan?
- How often would air and water emissions be monitored? And how would the proposed closing of DEP's Chambersburg office this fall affect oversight?
- How would the plant's operation affect water supply, area streams and roads?

Those who attend Thursday's meeting probably have many more questions as well.

Hopefully, officials and area residents will get some answers soon, responses that will help determine the future of this controversial project.

- For more information, see www.pennmarethanol.com and www.c4aQe.org.
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