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Coal gasification plant debate heats up DeWitt board meeting

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Sparks flew at last week's DeWitt Town Board meeting, as Jamesville residents opposed to a now-stalled coal gasification plant complained about the condition of the former cement factory that had been targeted for the project.

The give-and-take between some of the residents and board members foreshadowed what is likely to be a feisty town board election this fall.

A group of about a dozen residents, many of them associated with the Jamesville Positive Action Committee, demanded the town board take action to force the owners of the Alpha Portland Cement Co. to secure open vacant buildings and clean up potentially hazardous junk and debris on the site.

"This is right next to an elementary school," said former Onondaga County Legislator Vicki Baker. "There are open holes and broken glass that a kid can get into."

Baker last week was also designated by the DeWitt Democratic Committee to run for one of three seats on the town board that will be on the ballot this fall.

The Democrats also picked Ed Michalenko, an environmental scientist and the only Democrat on the Republican-controlled town board, to run for supervisor against incumbent Jim DiStefano.

"I don't know what we can enforce, but I do know that we'd never let a homeowner's front yard look like this," Michalenko said after photographs of trash and open buildings taken by a Positive Action Committee member were passed around.

DiStefano agreed that the mess was bad and a potential hazard. He noted, however, that the problem was on private property, out of the view of the public. He said the state Department of Environmental Conservation, an arm of the Democratic administration of Gov. Eliot Spitzer, was responsible, because the cement company - although not operating - still had valid permits for the site.

DiStefano said he would write to the DEC about the problems and try to force them into action. And he told those gathered that the fact that Baker and Michalenko were blaming the Republican board while letting the Democrat-run state off the hook was evidence of a political motive.

The cement factory had been tapped as the site of a multi-billion coal-to-gas plant that caused a public uproar and is now likely to be built in Scriba.

Opponents, however, have continued to press the town board to change the industrial zone

on the site. Town officials say they are doing everything they can to keep the plant out, but worry that selective re-zoning could be illegal.

The issue has helped fuel Democrats in the town, who last week assembled what DeWitt party chairwoman Linda Ervin described as their strongest ticket in years.

In addition to Michalenko and Baker, the Democrats designated Lorene McCoy Dadey, the former mayor of East Syracuse and a Republican, for town councilor.

It also picked former DeWitt Town Councilor Kerry Mannion, a member of the Conservative Party, to run for the board.

In addition to DiStefano, Republican town councilors Ken Anderson, Bob Faulkner and Joan Schroder are up for re-election this fall.

"I think people finally woke up," Ervin said. "Jamesville was a part of it, but many people in the town just don't like the way the town board has been operating."

DiStefano said he thinks voter will see that charges like this are based on politics, not reality.

"It's a free country," he said. "Let the people decide."

Environmental district OK'd

The village last week became the first municipality to designate a chunk of undeveloped land within its boundaries as a critical environmental area where development will be subject to an additional layer of review.

The village board unanimously approved designating about 80 acres of property - including village-owned Glenclyffe Park - as part of the special environmental district that the Manlius Greenspace Coalition has advocated for three years.

"It's one of the last pieces of undeveloped land in the village, and there are some special environmental features associated with that property that need to be taken into consideration when people build," said village board member Scott McGrew. "A lot of people saw the benefit of it."

Among the property's unique characteristics are three waterfalls, historic limestone kilns and rock formations. The protected Hart's-tongue fern is believed to be among the plants growing on the land, a layered ridge of sedimentary bedrock with steep slopes known as the Onondaga Escarpment.

The village was the first of three municipalities that will be asked to designate land for extra protection as part of a 7-mile green corridor that would stretch west from the village through the town of Manlius to Clark Reservation in DeWitt.

The Manlius Town Board was updated on the village vote during its meeting last week. A town committee is studying the issue.

Gage House digging starts

A team of students from the University of California at Berkley began excavating the yard of the historic Matilda Joslyn Gage House in Fayetteville Monday, searching for artifacts and the foundation of a former woodshed.

The group, led by Kim Cristensen, a Berkley doctoral student in anthropology, will carefully sift the dirt in a nearly 200-square-foot area next to the restored home at 210 E. Genesee

St. looking for relics dating to when Gage, a noted suffragette, lived there in the late 19th century. The pit will be as deep as it needs to be.

"We stop digging when we stop finding stuff," Christensen said.

It is Christensen's third summer digging at the site. In past years, however, the excavation was limited to scattered holes. This year, the team will explore the site beneath what was once Gage's woodshed in preparation for the shed's reconstruction.

The Matilda Joslyn Gage Foundation wants to re-build the shed and use it as offices for staff. Before the foundation can do that, it must do an archeological survey of the site to stay within the requirements of state grants awarded for the project, Christensen said.

The archeology team hopes to complete the work within a month, and the foundation wants to begin working on the woodshed by fall, she said.

Gage, who was born in Cicero, joined the women's rights movement in 1853 and was president of the National Woman Suffrage Association from 1875 to 1876.

Proposed walkway debated

Nearly 100 people last week attended a public meeting on a proposed walkway between the villages of Fayetteville and Manlius, where speakers opposed to the project dominated the public comment period.

"Some people living along Route 275 have some very strong feelings about changing the character of the road," said James D'Agostino, director of the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council. "It's fair to say that most of the people there fell into that category."

The transportation council hosted last Tuesday's meeting at Manlius Village Hall to present it's recommendations for making Route 275, also known as F-M Road, safer for pedestrians. The council spent more than a year studying the feasibility of a walkway at the request of the town of Manlius.

The council recommended that a walkway be built, and outlined four possible options ranging from an \$870,000 plan to put sidewalks on both sides of the 1.4-mile stretch of busy road to a \$200,000 proposal to put a stone-dust path on the west side of the street.

The most desirable of the plans among nearby residents who don't flatly oppose ANY walkway is to run a stone-dust path or sidewalk along the west side of F-M road only, D'Agostino said. By doing that, none of the historic stone walls along the route, and only a handful of the roadside trees, would have to be disturbed, he said.

Once the recommendation is finalized by the transportation council's board, it will be sent to the town board for review, D'Agostino said.

According to the council's study, the road is used extensively by children walking to one of two schools fronting the route, where traffic increased 30 percent between 2003 and 2006.

Vilardi to seek supervisor job

Village Mayor Melanie Vilardi plans to run for Fabius town supervisor this fall, according to the town Republican Committee.

The committee last week designated Vilardi as its candidate to replace Fabius Supervisor Bob DeMore.

DeMore, chairman of the Fabius GOP, is running for the Onondaga County Legislature

seat being vacated by Republican Dale Sweetland, one of four candidates vying to become Onondaga County executive.

Vilardi, the owner of Orchard Vali golf course, first won the village mayor's post in 1998.

The Fabius GOP also designated a slate of town Republican incumbents for this fall's election, including trustees James Conway and Deborah Foster and town Clerk Margaret Riker.

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