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Council to discuss Marcellus resolution

Motion asks state to stop OKing permits

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Morgantown City Council may consider a resolution asking for a statewide moratorium on Marcellus shale well permits until the state legislature comes up with

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regulations to manage the drilling.

Council will discuss the proposed resolution — drafted by Deputy Mayor Don Spencer — at its Tuesday Committee of the Whole meeting. The meeting is 7 p.m. at city hall.

No official action is taken at

Committee of the Whole meetings. City Council could vote on the resolution during its April 5 meeting, Spencer said. If it is approved, copies will be sent to the state Department of Environmental Protection secretary and the governor's office.

DEP Spokeswoman Kathy Cosco said the department doesn't think it necessary to stop issuing permits.

Spencer said the proposed resolution is not asking the DEP to permanently stop issuing permits for Marcellus shale wells, but is stressing that it must be done according to certain standards.

Marcellus shale natural gas drilling involves horizontal drilling thousands of feet below the surface. The rock formation is then frac-

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tured to release the gas.

The process utilizes a large quantity of water and chemicals.

The proposed resolution encourages the governor to call a special session of the legislature to address Marcellus shale drilling issues.

It asks that permits not be issued until the Legislature meets to come up with regulations to manage the Marcellus shale drilling and gives the DEP the funding to hire additional inspectors.

Spencer said right now, the DEP doesn't have the inspectors to provide an adequate amount of surveillance

for "this exploding industry."

"They're issuing permits and there's no one minding the public interest," he said.

Cosco said comparing the number of existing wells in the state — about 59,000 — to the number of inspectors the department has — currently, about 15 — doesn't really give an accurate picture.

The department has 17 inspector positions, she said, but two are vacant right now.

Cosco said various types of wells — natural gas, oil, coal bed methane, and underground injection — are all

included in the 59,000.

And an active well doesn't require the level of inspection and attention that a well currently being drilled does, she said.

Cosco said there are only 40 drilling rigs in the state now, so only 40 wells are being drilled at one time. That means those 15 inspectors need to devote the most time and attention to 40 wells, she said — though other wells just require site visits and checkups.

Cosco said the DEP issued permits for about 900 Marcellus Shale wells between 2009 and today.

In 2009 and 2010, the department issued about 400 permits for Marcellus shale wells, she said, and only 60 have been reported as completed.

Spencer said the public

interest — which includes water quality, air quality and general health — has to be protected from potential mismanagement of a Marcellus shale well.

Lewisburg City Council approved a resolution — similar to what Spencer is proposing in Morgantown — at its March 15 meeting, Mayor John Manchester said.

"The resolution was to try and spur action," he said. "And show our concern because the current regulations don't, in our view, adequately protect our public."

Lewisburg provides more than 4,700 people with water, Manchester said, and it needs to be able to provide the amount and quality of water those people need.

Two bills to regulate Mar-

cellus Shale drilling were merged in the recently concluded session of the state Legislature, but died on the session's final day.

Delegate Barbara Evans Fleischauer, D-Monongalia, previously said she hopes the Legislature can have a special session to address Marcellus shale drilling regulations.

Roughly two dozen legislators, including Fleischauer, signed a letter sent to acting Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin, asking him to order the DEP to stop issuing permits for drilling until the special session.

Fleischauer said it would be great to have additional support, if Morgantown ends up passing its resolution.

"It could help create the ground swell we need to get a special session," she said.