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Residents question Council on Marcellus Shale resolution

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Residents and energy-industry representatives packed Morgantown City Council chambers to discuss Marcellus Shale drilling in West Virginia during Tuesday night's Committee of the Whole meeting.

The council is preparing a resolution that would recommend the state to put a moratorium on the approval of permits to drill for natural gas using hydraulic fracturing, known as fracking, in West Virginia's Marcellus Shale until legislation is passed to regulate the process.

The fracking process uses fluids pumped into a well deep underground to create fractures in the rock, allowing for the extraction of natural gas. The resolution also asks the state legislature to hold a special session to address this issue.

Some residents representing environmental groups in the area said they supported council's resolution because of the possible environmental impacts from the process.

West Virginia House of Delegates Representative Barbara Fleischauer also spoke to Council in support of the resolution.

"We have a big problem in our state with the regulation, and we worked very, very hard to get the regulation passed that would be more modern and would allow us to monitor the Marcellus fracking, which is very different from traditional drilling," Fleischauer said.

She said the economic impact of such drilling cannot be denied and that the moratorium would only be for the issuance of new permits and would not affect the 900 permits already issued.

Currently the state Department of Environmental Protection has only 15 inspectors to monitor the wells, and there are numerous environmental concerns associated that should be addressed with legislation.

Water contamination was a major concern for those in favor of the resolution, and several anecdotes were provided relating to contamination from fracking.

"I have talked to people who have gotten sick, who are very concerned that their animals have died. I would feel a lot more comfortable with more than 15 inspectors," Fleischauer said. "There are lots and lots of issues related to Marcellus drilling, and I think they are all solvable."

Stacey Brodak, director of corporate development for Chesapeake Energy, said there is a lot of misinformation regarding the impact of drilling, and the economic benefits outweigh this impact if drilling is done responsibly.

"The economics don't matter if it's not done responsibly," Brodak said. "The industry worked with the DEP and the legislature on a comprehensive modernization of drilling regulations, and although lawmakers were unable to come to a resolution we are confident action will be taken."

Brodak urged council to let the legislative process take its course and said the lack of legislation does not affect the DEP's power to regulate drilling. She also cited a study by New York state which found no evidence of a link between fracking and groundwater contamination.

Duane Nichols, co-chair of the Monongahela Area Watersheds Compact, said the impact of fracking on groundwater is undeniable, and the process has already been detrimental to water quality in other parts of the state.

"The Monongahela River is already in crisis condition," he said.

"In Preston County we have approximately 50 sites that have been permitted, and that's going to affect the Cheat River. We have a vested interest in providing drinking water to the citizens, to the students of West Virginia University."

Nichols said total dissolved solids in the Mon River currently average around 270 parts per million, and in months with little rainfall this rises to 500 ppm. He said if fracking is allowed on the Mon River watershed, the average would be 400 to 500 parts per million.