Permit Pulled

By Charlie Deitch

Plans for a power plant that would have operated by burning waste coal were scrapped when the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection invalidated its air-quality plan permit on January 20.

Robinson Coal had been given the go-ahead for its controversial Beech Hollow Power Plant in 2005, just days before more stringent federal guidelines regarding the burning of waste coal took effect. The permit allowing for the plant's construction would have expired in April of this year.

And because there hadn't been any construction at the site for more than 18 months, it was becoming obvious that the plant would not be built by that date. Last year, residents who have opposed the project for years began reassembling to fight any permit extension (see "Clearing the Air," City Paper, Sept. 3, 2009).

According to the DEP, "federal Clean Air Act and Pennsylvania's Air Pollution Control Act invalidates an air-quality plan approval if there is no construction on the emission source for a period of 18 months."

Robinson Coal planned to build the plant next door to 37 million tons of waste coal, also known as a gob pile. It planned to burn that waste to operate the facility. Neighbors worried about the health dangers associated with burning the waste. According to a Sierra Club press release: "The Beech Hollow plant would have emitted 1,701,314 tons of global-warming pollution every year, along with harmful levels of soot and smog pollution, which can worsen asthma and cause other respiratory illnesses."

"We believe the PA DEP's decision is in the best interest of public health for those of us living near the proposed plant, as well as for all the residents living in Western Pennsylvania," said Cathy Donne, a member of Residents Against the Power Plant.

Randy Francisco, a representative of the Pennsylvania Sierra Club, says the groups opposing the plant knew a decision was due soon; however, they expected it to come closer to the April permit expiration. For residents in the area, he says, the decision is a tremendous relief.

"A lot of people worked very hard to make sure that these citizens' voices were heard," says Francisco. "They held meetings, sent letters and e-mails; it was all very impressive. They have been working toward this moment for years."

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