

Country Journal

Opinions



Editorial — Commentary
Letters to the Editor

State should decide biomass issue

In 18th century Chester a dispute arose between “the People of the Hill, so called,” and “the People of the River, so called,” over when and where the local minister would hold services. The two sides found themselves unable to reconcile their differences and agreed to recruit a committee of “indifferent men” from other towns to make the decision for them.

As we’ve watched the debate over Russell Biomass LLC’s proposed wood-fired power plant in Russell, we’ve come to a similar conclusion. The quality of life and environmental impacts on the one side, and the financial and other benefits currently being negotiated on the other, will seriously affect the town and all who live there for many years to come. Weighing this mass of positives and negatives must be based on hard facts and cold logic, not on fear, anger nor, for that matter, fond hope for a return to a golden age of bulging town coffers and jobs right here at home (the mills that supported the town back then also fouled the air and helped to turn the Westfield River into a sewer).

What the town needs most of all is the truth, which is often hard to come by and particularly hard when the discussion is full of rage, distortion, convenient omissions, rampant misconceptions, demonization of opponents, unfounded accusations and spin. To be blunt, most of these transgressions come from opponents, many of whom accuse the developers, loudly and often, of being liars, while making dubious statements of their own—such as their often repeated claim that the developers want to change their permit to double the number of trucks delivering fuel to the plant (ignoring a change from a six to five day delivery schedule, and substituting the daily maximum number of trucks for the average).

We also have a problem with the two boards currently holding hearings on proposed changes to the company’s special permit. At least two of the planning board’s three voting members have “No Biomass” signs on their lawns, and the other operates a business that could be affected by a leap in the demand for wood. At the other end of the table, the three members of the zoning board of appeals seem very much in favor of the plant. The people of Russell deserve a hearing with boards made up of “indifferent” people who will base their decisions on the facts.

And what about those facts? They involve a wide range of disciplines, environmental engineering, civil engineering, environmental law, hydrogeology, municipal finance and probably a number of others, including, of course, tort law. People go to school for years to learn that stuff. How many of us have sufficient grounding in any of those fields to understand, even in broad general terms, the implications and consequences of the actions proposed? Some people, particularly opponents, have done significant research to educate themselves, but a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, riddled with gaps, misconceptions and confusion. Some others appear qualified in one or another of these disciplines, but their motivation isn’t known.

The best qualified to make the final decisions are the cooler and better informed heads at the state level whose motivation is a paycheck.