

Proposed state coal plant finding resistance

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Students and residents in the state have until Oct. 27 to voice their opinions concerning the construction of a \$2 billion coal-fired power plant proposed for Washington County.

Proponents of the plant say it will reduce power prices and create jobs in the state, but adversaries worry about the potential costs to the environment and local community.

One student is joining the campaign to stop the approval of the proposed plant, Plant Washington.

Ian Karra, a freshman from Roswell, is a member of Georgia Youth for Energy Solutions.

"There comes a point when we have to evaluate whether the energy needs that our power companies are telling us we have are worth sacrificing our air quality, our water quality and the economic well-being of other communities," Karra said.

Power4Georgians, LLC, a group of electric membership cooperatives (EMCs), has proposed to build the plant in Washington County, just northeast of Sandersville - and about 100 miles south of Athens.

The Georgia Environmental Protection Division is responsible for ensuring that the plant complies with air, water and a number of other environmental regulations.

Power4Georgians submitted its application in January of 2008. The EPD reviewed the application and released draft permits in August of this year.

"The air and water impacts of Plant Washington will not be limited to Sandersville," said Mary Carr, renewable energy coordinator for the Southern Alliance for Clean Energy. "This is really a statewide issue. Even areas like Augusta will be hit hard, because the pollution will follow the wind."

Certain health concerns have also surfaced in the debate over the power plant, such as the effects of mercury deposition in nearby water sources, such as the Oconee River.

According to Dean Alford, spokesman for Power4Georgians, the plant will deposit less than a teaspoon of mercury a day into local water sources.

"People don't realize that mercury occurs in the environment naturally. Over half the mercury in the atmosphere comes from nature - from volcanoes," Alford said.

Jac Capp, air protection branch chief for the EPD, said, in terms of water quality, the primary concern would be mercury deposition.

But Capp and Alford each said the EPD is in the process of reducing mercury in the state's

waters.

"Georgia is going to see its most aggressive mercury reduction in history," Alford said. "The EPD is going to reduce 100 pounds over a year. Regardless of whether the plant is built, there still will be less mercury in the water than there is today."

Karra had a different take on the situation.

"It doesn't change the fact that [the plant is] going to take up 16 million gallons of water each day [from local water sources], when we are already facing historic droughts," Karra said. "In addition, it's going to pump six to seven million tons of CO₂ annually into the air: the equivalent of putting over a million more cars on the road in Georgia."

Karra and other anti-coal advocates also question Sandersville as a fair location for the plant site.

Environmentalists charge that the plant will be powering homes outside Washington County, and that local residents will not benefit from the reduction in power prices.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, as of 2007 the percentage of people living below poverty in Washington County was 21.8 percent, compared to 14.3 percent in Georgia overall, and 9.4 percent in Cobb County.

Of the six EMCs funding the plant, Cobb EMC has pledged the largest amount of money, Karra said.

"I'm trying to bring environmental justice into the equation," said Daniel Moskowitz, a University graduate, who recently founded Phaseout Now, an organization which is working to "phase out" coal as an energy source. "Power4Georgians wants to poison a community that isn't even theirs."

On the other hand, people in support of the Sandersville location say residents - local and statewide - will benefit from reduced power prices and the creation of jobs.

Alford cited Sandersville as a good location for the plant because of its proximity to a transmission line.

He also said there are no wetlands on the property, which encompasses about 1,200 acres.

He added that there is a rail line, about eight miles away, which can bring coal to the plant.

Finally, he said, the Oconee River and aquifer would be able to provide the necessary amounts of water to the plant.

Alford said the project will provide close to 15,000 temporary construction jobs for more than four years, and about 470 permanent jobs at the plant site and throughout the state.

But others aren't convinced the plant will better Washington County.

"I don't want my family's energy bills paying for the economic and environmental exploitation of

a traditionally marginalized community," Karra said. "There are already 10 coal plants and two nuclear plants including Plant Scherer, the number one CO2-emitting plant in the country, in Georgia. If we increase the efficiency of these plants we will be able to provide enough energy to Georgia residents and the new plant will be unnecessary."

A citizen-sponsored hearing is scheduled today in Savannah.

And on Oct. 20, the EPD will host its third public hearing in Sandersville - at Ridge Road Elementary School - to gather public comments and answer questions before the final permits are released.

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