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Project plan: Take water from adjacent town

Proposal in Lewis County causes variety of concerns

By BRYON ACKERMAN, Observer-Dispatch

When Greig town officials denied a variance to the Hidden Falls Spring Water project in Lewis County, they hoped to avoid concerns that taking water from springs in the town could drain other bodies of water and dry out residents' wells.

But the people proposing the project came up with a new plan: operate the water-hauling business from a piece of property across the Black River in the town of Turin and still take the water from the same springs in Greig by placing piping underground.

Turin officials haven't decided yet whether to grant a permit for the construction of the company's facilities because the process is held up in a state Department of Environmental Conservation review.

But people who have been opposing the plan since it was first proposed more than six years ago remain worried about the impacts of what would happen if it's approved.

"Where does that leave us?" Greig town Supervisor Marilyn Patterson said. "What recourse do we have if our wells do start running dry?"

The project proposes using water from springs at the property of John and Lynn Smoke in the town of Greig by having it flow through a pipeline to a facility on property owned by John Smoke in the town of Turin, according to officials and the Draft Environmental Impact Statement.

The water would be conveyed naturally, and no pumping would be conducted, officials said, but the facility would use trucks and trailers to haul the water elsewhere.

Arnold Swiernik, the project manager for Smoke, said he had no comment on the concerns raised about the project. He referred questions to Smoke, who could not be reached Thursday.

'Kind of winging it'

A public comment period for the environmental review process ended May 7, and the DEC is investigating the project's potential impacts on groundwater and bodies of water such as Brantingham Lake, said Mark Wiggins, the project manager for the DEC.

But even as those reviews are taking place, opponents of the project and even Wiggins said state regulations and guidelines for dealing with such water issues are lacking. Wiggins said there are efforts in state government to address such concerns, but nothing is finalized yet.

“At this point, we’re kind of winging it,” Wiggins said.

Groups such as Protect the Adirondacks! and the Adirondack Council have stepped in to oppose the project.

The council is concerned because the springs flow into two creeks and the Black River, and the project could impact private wells and farmers’ ability to irrigate their lands, said John Sheehan, council communications director.

A news release issued by the council Thursday called for the DEC to create new regulations to govern extractions of water from any part of the state.

“New York’s communities need the DEC’s help to avoid being victimized by large corporations seeking to remove their most valuable natural resource,” council Executive Director Brian Houseal said, in a released statement.

Tale of two towns

The majority of people in Greig are opposed to the project, and they worry that a large water-bottling company could move in if the plan is approved and increase the amount of water that would be taken from the springs, said Patterson, the Greig town supervisor.

For that reason, if the project moves forward, Turin Planning Board Chairman Howard Leitner would like to see a limitation placed on how much water could be taken from the springs in the future, he said.

At a Turin public hearing about the permit, only one person from Turin attended, along with many people from Greig, Leitner said. Some Greig residents wanted Turin to deny the permit, but he doesn’t think that can or should be done, he said.

Turin officials, however, are listening to Greig residents’ concerns while they’re waiting for environmental reviews to be completed, Leitner said.

“Their argument is that it might do damage to the town of Greig, which we don’t want to see happen,” he said.