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## Let's wait for the facts on energy plant

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Proponents and defenders of Erie Renewable Energy LLC's tires-to-energy plant are right when they say protesters from Keep Erie's Environment Protected don't have the facts yet about this project. They don't. K.E.E.P.'s objections to this alternative-energy plant may be based more on fear than reality.

That hasn't stopped the group from trying to frame the debate about whether this plant, proposed for the former International Paper Co. site, is a good fit for the Erie region. But even if you don't care for the noise and static K.E.E.P. is generating, its successful public campaign against the plant has effectively put Erie Renewable Energy and the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection on notice. And that's really not a bad thing, is it?

The burden, as it should be, is on Erie Renewable Energy and the state to prove that the plant will be environmentally safe. More specifically to the claim driving this debate: Is the technology safe? What residue will be created by the process? And what happens to it?

The answers are not known. We're apparently going to have to wait for Erie Renewable Energy to file its application to the DEP for an air-quality permit, likely in December. And that's really not such a bad thing, is it?

The company asserts that the plant is not an incinerator, would not burn tires and that the process of gassifying tires will not create harmful toxins that will pollute the air. No tire piles will exist. But the community won't have to take its word for it. The plans will be subject to public hearings and other scrutiny for probably 10 months to a year before the DEP makes its decision on a permit.

K.E.E.P. officials, however, complain that Erie Renewable Energy has not disclosed enough information to evaluate the proposed plant's specific "threat potential," and they're obviously not going to wait for the facts to come in. They have been forecasting disaster for months, based on their own speculation.

Our position is this: Everyone in the Erie region should be interested in finding and developing sources of alternative energy, but never at the risk of safety, let alone environmental disaster.

This proposed tires-to-energy plant would create 60 new jobs, reclaim a brownfield site and dispose of waste tires, which are a major environmental problem in this state. Its proposed location is exactly where the community set it up to be, in a site designated for heavy industry.

If -- and it's a big if at this point -- the DEP evaluates and concludes that the technology utilized to gasify tires is environmentally safe, this is a project worth pursuing.

The DEP, which will face its own scrutiny, has plenty of time to make this crucial evaluation. The most optimistic view from local project developer Greg Rubino and other Erie Renewable Energy officials predicts construction of the plant starting sometime in 2010, if it gets the permits.

We urge residents to keep an open mind while we wait for the facts to come in.