
Opponents rush to judgment on tire-to-energy plant

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When the factory's boilers started howling on Friday afternoon, the phones in our newsroom started ringing.

Callers said the noise coming from Lake Erie Biofuels' new plant on the former International Paper Co.. site was enough to drown out conversation.. One likened it to a low-flying jet.

Plant officials told our reporter the din was a byproduct of firing up the boilers for the first time and would soon subside.. In that sense it was a joyous noise, the sound of new manufacturing jobs coming on line in a town that has seen so many of its factories fall silent.

The investment by Lake Erie Biofuels' parent company, Erie Management Group, has been rightly hailed as the sort of risk-taking innovation Erie needs to re-create itself.. But across East Lake Road on another piece of the IP property, an industrial project of a different sort is drawing a quite different reception.

Erie Renewable Energy LLC's plans to build a plant that would turn scrap tires into energy have mobilized organized opposition that brings both numbers and passion to the debate.. Members of Keep Erie's Environment Protected paint the proposed plant as an imminent danger to public health; as unacceptably close to residential neighborhoods; and as a direct threat to our town's growing tourism industry.

Before the company files a single permit document with the state Department of Environmental Protection, its opponents have seen and heard enough.

Amid that uproar, Erie Times-News reader Joe Koehle raised an interesting question in a letter to the editor on Thursday.

Five years after this community reeled from the loss of IP's paper mill and its hundreds of jobs, Koehle wonders whether we would welcome that mill and those jobs back to the site.

The shrinking of Erie's manufacturing muscle is widely mourned and has produced an identity crisis of sorts focused on the town this used to be.. That town was built around factories and smokestacks surrounded by housing.

As a kid, I frequently visited my dad at the old firehouse at West 18th and Liberty streets, which sat in the shadow of the Continental Rubber Works in the heart of Little Italy.. The former Bucyrus-Erie heavy equipment factory on West 12th Street still butts up against the dense neighborhood to the north.

My wife grew up in the neighborhood just east of the then-thriving paper mill on East Lake Road, which in those days was still owned by Hammermill Paper Co.. When the weather conditions were just right -- or just wrong in this case -- a sour-smelling haze would settle over the streets and leave you wishing for a stiff breeze.

And I remember during recess at Blessed Sacrament School in the late 1960s, looking down Greengarden Road and seeing rust-covered smoke billowing from the stacks of Erie Forge & Steel.. In those days especially, manufacturing was messy.

Environmental regulations have been tightened down since then.. For decades now, Erie Forge's smoke has disappeared into a massive vacuum cleaner attached to the plant.

The question before us today is whether those regulations are sufficient to what Erie Renewable Energy proposes for one of Erie's oldest industrial sites.. That question will be answered in a climate in which many neighbors of the proposed plant have zero tolerance for the trade-offs that came with the manufacturing jobs of old.

That leads back to Joe Koehle's question.. We lament the loss of those jobs and factories, but would we welcome them back?

Much of the correspondence I've seen from opponents of the tire plant isn't really asking for due diligence from the government and news media.. It's calling for summary judgment.

My experience in this business has taught me to be wary of folks who start with a conclusion and reason their way back from there.. Such minds rarely change, however things play out.

But what Erie Renewable Energy proposes and the technology it proposes to use are relatively new and different, and they just might raise questions the DEP's process isn't equipped to deal with.. Those will be matters for the government and newspaper reporters -- not to mention the plant's opponents -- once the company starts providing concrete details about what it has in mind.

Many plant opponents have put their verdict ahead of the evidence.. They'll have to understand if the rest of us come at this thing the other way around.

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