
Tire crowd fired up.

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Erie residents Tom and Colleen Welch are hardly environmental activists.

"We've never been involved in anything like this before," said Tom Welch as the couple walked into Erie City Hall on Monday. But now there is a "Stop The Tire Plant" sign in front of the family's Ross Street home and they were among 240 people who jammed council chambers for the latest meeting of Keep Erie's Environment Protected -- or K.E.E.P., a group formed to fight plans for a waste-tire-to-energy plant on the former International Paper site in east Erie.

Bernice Biernik, of Franklin Avenue, and Genevieve Wiertel, of East 13th Street, are veterans of other community battles.. "We tried to keep fluoride out of the water system. We collected signatures for that," Wiertel said as the two women, wearing newly printed bright green K.E.E.P. T-shirts, sat in the audience.

What the two women and the Welches shared was a concern that the tire-to-energy plant will present a health threat to their city and neighborhood.

"You aren't allowed to burn trash in the city, but they will be able to burn millions of tires.. Where is the logic in that?" asked Tom Welch. "I can't believe they could burn that many tires and not cause pollution."

The plant, the audience was told, would process 30 million tires a year.. The company that wants to build the plant -- Erie Renewable Energy -- says the plant is not an incinerator and would not burn tires, but gasify them and burn the gas.

K.E.E.P. members dismiss that distinction as a smoke screen.

"There are schools close by -- kids are close by," said Biernik as she leafed through a packet of material provided by K.E.E.P. "If any of this is true, it doesn't sound good at all."

The slate of speakers at the session talked about the dangers of various chemicals released by combustion, and the health threats posed by emissions, especially ultra fine emissions.

"Erie's air is already unhealthy," said Michael Parker, general counsel for Pittsburgh-based Group Against Smog and Pollution. He said Erie air quality now could not meet new standards that the federal Environmental Protection Agency might issue.

Lawrence Park Township commissioners last week went on record opposing the plant, and K.E.E.P. President Randy Barnes urged people to step up political .. on their local elected officials to follow suit.

K.E.E.P. members said Erie Renewable Energy has not disclosed enough information to judge its plant's specific "threat potential," but the group members showed examples of other plants that use either tires or fluidized-bed technology.

Erie Renewable Energy officials said they will make the details public when they seek air quality permits with the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, a process they expect to take 10 months to a year.

"There will be months and months when people can get an opportunity to look at actual information rather than rumor, innuendo and supposition," said local project manager and real estate developer Greg Rubino prior to the K.E.E.P. meeting.

But concerns about the plant are spreading now.

Westside resident Eric Brozell said he weighed the positives -- 60 new jobs, reclaiming a brownfield site, and getting rid of waste tires -- but said all that took a back seat to health threats of pollution.

"It doesn't sound good," he said.

Jim Carroll