

Coal-plant fires wrath, brings hope to Pee Dee

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By Molly Parker
Staff Writer

The new coal-fired power plant Santee Cooper plans to build on the edge of the Great Pee Dee River is either a “noxious behemoth” or the environmentally friendly key to economic vitality in rural Florence County, depending on whose turn it was at the microphone earlier this month.

Some 400 residents, community leaders and business owners packed the Hannah-Pamplico High School gymnasium on an early-November evening for the only public hearing on the plant scheduled by the state Department of Health and Environmental Control, which is charged with determining whether to issue Santee Cooper the air permit the utility needs to build its proposed \$1 billion plant.

Local politicians trumpeted the 1,400 construction jobs and 100 full-time jobs that will come as a package deal with the facility to an area of the state that has been bleeding industry jobs over the last several years.

“Please approve this permit as soon as possible,” Pamplico Mayor Gene Gainey said, noting that his struggling area of the state has lost 3,000 jobs in the last five years as manufacturing companies downsized or closed.

Judging by all the green “Pee Dee” stickers on attendees’ shirts, the plant supporters far outnumbered opponents at the hearing.

“It looks like people are overwhelmingly supportive,” Santee Cooper spokeswoman Laura Varn said, looking out onto the crowd seated in folding chairs on the Raiders’ home court.

A few business leaders, who called affordable and reliable power the backbone of their bottom lines, transported their employees to the meeting by the bus load.

But environmentalists and some nearby residents opposed to the plant made a statement as well. They held a press conference just before the start of the hearing and wielded anti-coal signs such as the one held by Joseph Nicewonger, a Coastal Conservation League intern from Myrtle Beach, that read: “got mercury? Yes you have! So have your children!”

Mike King, who lives near the parcel where Santee Cooper plans to build at least one and possibly two 600-megawatt pulverized coal units, stood at the entrance of the door handing out copies of a recent series by The Post and Courier that examined mercury hot

spots in the state, including test results showing that some residents of those areas had unnaturally high levels of mercury in their bodies.

When it was his turn at the microphone, King, who created the nonprofit Pee Dee River Watchers organization in part to fight the utility's proposal, encouraged residents to call their state and local representatives and protest "this noxious behemoth on our rivers."

Speakers, who numbered about 80, were able to get their opinions and questions onto the official record.

DHEC officials, though facilitating the meeting, offered no feedback and answered no questions. But they noted the agency plans to eventually provide a written document answering questions and concerns raised at the hearing and thereafter. The state agency will continue to accept written statements and questions until Dec. 7, and the document will be mailed to area residents.

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