

## **Both sides ready for next step**

Comment period will end Dec. 7, then agency will decide which issues valid

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Although the public comment period for the proposed Santee Cooper coal plant doesn't end until Dec. 7, many people are gearing up for the next stage in the battle on both sides of the issue.

According to S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control spokesman Thom Berry, the next step in the process will be for DHEC to review the comments gathered during the public comment period and determine which ones raise valid issues that still need to be considered before moving forward with their decision. He said at that point, any issues deemed unresolved or unaddressed will be sent to Santee Cooper officials for a chance to be reviewed and rectified by the company.

"We will then sit down and begin the deliberative process internally to decide whether to approve or deny the permit application," Berry said.

He said he does expect there to be litigation, regardless of the decision DHEC's governing board recommends. He said there also is a process for appealing the decision.

"Once we publish the agency decision, that will begin an appeal time table. Anyone who wishes to appeal the agency's decision may do so," Berry said. "(They) will go before the DHEC governing board first, (then) the state administrative law court, the state court of appeals and (finally) the state Supreme Court."

But some people aren't happy with the way the process currently is laid out.

"We don't believe that they are going to do anything more than they have done for 40 years, and that is pander to big government and big industry," said Mike King, spokesman for the Pee Dee River Watchers, an environmental group focused primarily on the Great Pee Dee River.

King said he is convinced the organization isn't looking out for the interests of the people living in the area.

"We, frankly, believe that they are a rubber-stamp outfit," he said.

But Florence County Councilman Ken Ard said he supports the coal plant, and he thinks DHEC will do what is best for the people of Pamplico and Johnsonville, two towns that will be directly affected by the addition of a 600 megawatt coal-fired generation facility to be located along the Great Pee Dee River.

“I am supportive of it, understanding there are a lot of questions that need to be answered,” he said. “I live there, I grew up there, I represent that area on council, so I guess my job is to support policy and things that would benefit that district and to not support things that would not benefit that district.”

He said he’s understanding of the many environmental groups that have been protesting the coal plant. But, he said, he feels the plant would be the best thing for the community.

“I would never be supportive of anything — I don’t care if it was 10,000 jobs — that would harm my constituency, the environment or the river,” Ard said. “I’ve had a lot of questions for Santee Cooper. I’ve had a lot of interaction with people that I trust and respect that don’t even have anything to do with Santee Cooper, and they have given me satisfactory answers, and I don’t have any problem supporting the plant.”

Ard said he agreed the environmentalists do have some valid questions regarding the issues surrounding the coal plant, but he hopes they refrain from using fear to get people to side with them against the coal plant.

Recently, in the town of Pamplico, there has been a dispute regarding the signatures on a petition in favor of the coal plant presented to DHEC officials at the public hearing earlier this month.

Some members of the community who oppose the coal plant said they feel the signatures presented on the petition could not have been from the area they were said to have been collected from, since many of the people living in a five mile radius of the plant’s proposed site are opposed to the facility.

Local environmentalists have requested to see a copy of the petition through the Freedom of Information Act. King said the petition — which has 569 names of people opposing the plant on another petition — already is available for public viewing.

“We are not happy with the lack of transparency of this so-called petition that (Pamplico) Mayor (Gene) Gainey presented at the last draft air public hearing,” King said. “It is simply not true, because our people who live at the plant site went around on their bikes and collected signatures (for the anti-plant petition).”