

Meeting held on new coal plant

By Tony Bartelme
The Post and Courier
Friday, November 9, 2007

PAMPLICO — Nearly 400 people from across the area converged on this tiny town's high school gym Thursday night, but not to watch the Hannah-Pamplico Raiders play basketball.

They came to root for or against Santee Cooper's plan to build a \$1 billion coal-fired power plant nearby, a plant some say is a public health threat and others say is critical to keeping the lights on for half the state's residents and industries.

Before Santee Cooper can move forward with the plant, it needs a permit from the state Department of Health and Environmental Control. Last month, DHEC approved a draft permit.

Thursday night's public hearing was the only one DHEC has scheduled for this project, and the parking lot around the high school filled quickly as the sun set. Employees of Santee Cooper and two of its biggest customers, Alcoa and Nucor, arrived in a chartered bus, irking a group of environmentalists.

"That's what I call stacking the deck," said Mike King, head of Pee Dee River Watchers — a group opposed to the plant.

"I hope they're getting overtime," said Ben Gregg, executive director of the S.C. Wildlife Federation.

Moments before the hearing began, Gregg, King and other opponents held a news conference, demanding that DHEC suspend the draft permit until the agency tests people in the area for mercury contamination.

They cited a recent series by The Post and Courier that identified mercury hotspots in the state and showed how some of the worst form a triangle of mercury contamination in the area where Santee Cooper wants to build the new plant.

The newspaper also paid to test people who eat fish in this area and along the Edisto River and found that frequent fish-eaters have unusually high levels of mercury in their bodies.

"These findings raise serious questions about the impact of this plant on a human population already at risk for mercury poisoning," said Ann Stoeckman, a biology professor at Francis Marion University.

But Santee Cooper supporters far outnumbered opponents. Many pro-plant attendees wore stickers with "Pee Dee" written in green. Some were still in their utility company uniforms.

Eighty-four people signed up to comment. Many were with Santee Cooper, Alcoa, Nucor and other area industries and said a coal-fired power plant was the best way to keep rates down and jobs in America. Representatives from the state's electric co-ops also turned out in force.

Pamplico Mayor Gene Gainey presented a petition signed by 1,076 area residents who want the plant built. Santee Cooper estimates the project will create 1,400 construction jobs and 100 permanent jobs at the plant if it opens as planned in 2012.

Gainey said the community has lost 3,000 mill jobs over the past several years and sees the power plant as a chance to reinvigorate the area's economy. He sees new businesses coming to the area, lured by the plant and a widened four-lane highway connecting the town with Florence and places east and south.

"I'm trying to take care of this town," Gainey said. "In my opinion, if we didn't get this plant, we'd still be stalemate just sitting down here in the country like we've been for years."

Gainey dismissed concerns over pollution, especially from poisonous mercury. "I think it's overblown." He said he's met extensively with Santee Cooper and is assured that the plant will exceed all pollution requirements.

King was the first to speak out against the plant and the first speaker to have the microphone taken away after he went over his allotted three minutes.

"The problem is mercury, and it's already here," he said, citing The Post and Courier's findings that DHEC has used its advanced blood-testing equipment to test only one member of the public for mercury. He urged DHEC to "turn the page" and deny the permit. He said he has a petition signed by 469 people against the plant.

The public can submit written comments to DHEC through Dec. 7. After that, the agency will sift through comments and possibly ask Santee Cooper to respond. Then a project engineer will decide whether to issue the final permit. But that's not likely to be the end of the debate.

"We have no illusions," said Thom Berry, DHEC spokesman. "No matter what the decision is, we figure this will end up in court."