

A step toward natural gas drilling

By: **HILARY BENTMAN** (Mon, Feb/12/2007)

A Michigan company has submitted a permit application to drill for natural gas in Nockamixon, but the application was not filled out correctly and returned to the firm, said state officials.

Arbor Resources LLC wants to search and extract natural gas they believe lies beneath the Upper Bucks township and for the last few years has been getting landowners in Nockamixon and neighboring Tincicum to lease their properties so the firm can search and remove what it finds.

Arbor must first apply for a drilling permit with the Department of Environmental Protection, which it did on Monday. But the application was "administratively and technically incomplete and returned to them," said DEP spokesman Tom Rathbun. "It was lacking information."

Arbor representatives will meet with DEP officials at the end of the month for a "pre-application" meeting so the company can explain what it wants to do in Nockamixon and the DEP can tell them what is needed, said Rathbun.

The DEP recommends this meeting before any application is submitted, he said.

Once a complete permit application is submitted, the review process can take about 90 days, but could be longer in Nockamixon's case since this is new territory for drilling and it's a company that state officials have not worked with in the past.

"I suspect this one will go longer — it's something new, a new application, a new area and the level of interest," said Rathbun.

Drilling in Nockamixon has divided the community. Homeowners who signed a lease with Arbor have been promised money up front for their leased land and future royalties from the profits of the gas that is sold. The amount of money a landowner can make varies.

As many as 12 wells could be drilled in the search for natural gas. The wells would be about 8,000 feet deep, and drilling cannot occur within 200 feet a home or 100 feet of a wetland or stream, according to the DEP.

Officials from the DEP and other agencies will review the drilling permit request and the public will have an opportunity to provide comments at a hearing if they choose.

Once the DEP says the project can move forward, the department will request the company posts a bond and will issue a permit.

The DEP could also reject an application, but the department's decision can be appealed by either the company or the community, said Rathbun.

"Our responsibility to the public is to make sure their concerns are heard and that the scientific data is considered," he said. "We also have a responsibility to the applicant to conduct a thorough and timely review of their application."

Unlike areas in western Pennsylvania where drilling for gas and oil has gone on for decades, there are still many unknowns about just how much natural gas exists in Nockamixon. Drilling for gas in this part of the state was virtually unheard of, but with high energy prices and improvements in exploration and extraction technology, companies are now interested in smaller pockets of minerals.

Meanwhile, in preparation for the drilling, Nockamixon officials are trying to pass laws to tighten restrictions on operations, including hours of work, noise level, financial bonds the company would have to post, hazardous spills, groundwater contamination, and emergency response.

But there are concerns the regulations would not hold up in court if challenged.

The DEP regulates drilling and issues permits, but Nockamixon, under its land use powers, can establish some of its own regulations. Last spring, Nockamixon officials passed a law prohibiting drilling in the township's villages and environmentally sensitive areas.

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