

More cheers than protests in area that could get 4th nuke reactor

By GEOFF MULVIHILL | Associated Press Writer, November 25, 2007.

ELSINBORO, N.J. - The columns of white smoke visible when you look down river are a constant reminder that one of the nation's biggest nuclear power plants is just a few miles away from this rural town in south Jersey.

The plant's owner, Public Service Energy Group, is considering adding a fourth reactor to its complex, known as Artificial Island.

While the prospect of a nuclear reactor might cause an uproar in most communities, it's largely welcome in this rural area deep in southern New Jersey.

"We need it bad," said customer Henry Spencer, a graduate student and unemployed social worker. He says the jobs another reactor would bring would far outweigh any safety or health risk.

After 30 years of living next to a nuclear plant _ and for those in Lower Alloways Creek Township, reaping the considerable tax breaks that come with it _ many people in this rural, marshy area near the mouth of the Delaware River see the nuclear plant as a good neighbor.

With some 1,500 employees and contractors, the nuclear plant is Salem County's largest employer and a big donor to area charities.

A cozy relationship between nuclear plants and their home communities is common across the country, said Tyson Slocum, the director of the anti-nuclear Public Citizen's Energy Program in Washington.

"It's part of a challenge of folks who have concerns about nuclear power," Slocum said.

Norm Cohen, the coordinator of Unplug Salem, which wants the facility shut down, lives on the New Jersey shore, some 50 miles away. He says it's hard to get Salem County residents to join the fight against nuclear power.

"People would rather get a good-paying job than worry about the effects of long-term radiation on their family," he said. The struggle to find opponents of the plant is good news for nuclear power producers.

With high oil prices, a new focus on clean energy, federal incentives to build and the passage of two decades since the horrific meltdown at the Chernobyl plant in Russia, many nuclear power plants are looking to expand in the United States.

Nationwide, 104 reactors provide about one-fifth percent of the electricity in the United States. Some experts say that 35 to 50 more would be needed to keep up with the nation's expected energy demands over the next few decades.

Energy companies are anxious to fill the void, with the help of federal subsidies.

For the first time in nearly 30 years, some have begun applying for permits to build new reactors _ all at active nuclear power facilities.

Bill Levis, president of PSEG Power, says the company should decide by the end of next year whether to apply and which kind of reactor to pursue and exactly where to put it. It would likely take at least a decade before a new reactor, with a price tag in the billions, could be running alongside the current ones, known as Salem I, Salem II and Hope Creek. New Jersey's only other reactor is the Oyster Creek plant in Ocean County.

The three Salem plants were troubled three years ago. Critics were complaining that the plant was unsafe. Then, the plant was dealing with a series of reactor shutdowns, including one that lasted five months after a radiation leak at the Salem I reactor.

Lately, though, the plant has been performing better _ and PSEG is trying to get the word out about that.

Earlier this month, the company announced that it set a refueling speed record when the Salem I reactor got new fuel in 25 days _ 10 days faster than expected.

"We work awful hard at educating the folks here," Levis said.

Many people who live in Lower Alloways Creek, which is known locally as "LAC," may not be a tough sell about the benefits of the plant.

In the state with the highest average property tax bill, the township with the reactors does not collect any property taxes to run the local government or the one local school. Many homeowners there pay under \$1,000 per year in property taxes, compared with more than \$6,000 statewide.

Much of the money to run the municipal government and the school comes from the more than \$7 million the community gets each year from the state's energy tax receipts. Most of the rest comes from interest from the money the township put aside decades ago when it got even more for having the power plant within its boundaries.

Still, Mayor Ellen Pompper, whose husband and son are nuclear operators, wants to make sure the town is compensated for putting up with the risk of a meltdown _ even though she believes one is not likely. "We do deserve something," she said.

The issue of who gets money _ and how much _ in return for having the plant nearby is one of the few locally contentious issues about the plant.

At Seagrave's, a little hoagie shop in Elsinboro with a fading sign out front, owner Ron Seagrave thinks Elsinboro and other places should get some of the tax revenue, too.

"The only thing I wish they'd do," he said, "is share it."

Mary Waddington, who has lived her whole life in Elinsboro, just a few miles from the plant, is among those who oppose the nuclear power plant.

Waddington, 69, said she is concerned about what becomes of spent nuclear fuel and the effects of long-term radiation on people in the area. Like other activists, she says there's an alternative to nuclear power: cutting back their energy consumption and use sustainable sources, like the wind, sun and tides to generate power.

Still, Waddington continues to live near Artificial Island. "I have to trust the integrity of the plant," she said.

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