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Residents threaten lawsuit over Schlumberger project in Horseheads

Attorney: Proper environmental review is lacking

By Jason Whong
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A group of Chemung County residents is preparing to sue the Village of Horseheads, if necessary, to prevent the proposed Schlumberger project from proceeding without an environmental impact statement.

"I'm in discussions with other larger environmental groups to help bring additional legal action if it's required," said Helen Slottje, 42, of Ithaca, the lawyer representing the residents.

Horseheads Mayor Donald Ziegler said he had not yet seen the letter but had heard about it. He declined to comment on the matter Wednesday.

In a letter sent Wednesday to the village board, Slottje accused the board of failure to comply with state law in its handling of the proposed Schlumberger gas drilling support facility planned for 90 acres the company owns at The Center at Horseheads industrial park.

The letter requested that the board revisit the State Environmental Quality Review (SEQR) it completed at Tuesday's meeting and make a finding of "significant environmental impact" for the project.

The board voted unanimously Tuesday against that finding. In doing so, the board allowed the project to go forward without an environmental impact statement.

The letter also asked the board to direct the village code enforcement officer to issue a stop-work order and a cease-and-desist order for an 8.8-acre site in use by Schlumberger as a temporary facility.

"If they want to have this temporary occupation, that in and of itself requires a review that has not been undertaken," Slottje said.

The letter accused the board of failing to take the "hard look" required by law as it performed the SEQR at Tuesday's meeting.

It also accused the board of violating or undermining the State Environmental Quality Review Act by doing the following:

* Allowing Schlumberger to begin construction in May without a building permit or environmental review.

* Issuing a temporary building permit for the construction July 7 without an environmental review.

* Failing to include road work and rail work in the SEQR it conducted Tuesday.

The letter lays the foundation for future legal action because state law requires litigants to exhaust administrative remedies before filing a lawsuit against a municipal body.

Slottje says she represents a group of around 15 county residents and said that maybe 10 of the residents live in Horseheads.

"The group is sort of evolving and changes all the time," Slottje said. "We're sort of very much a grassroots, people coming together."

She said the residents don't have a name for their group, but that they need to start thinking of one.

"We spend our time trying to address our concerns, and not on things like coming up with a name yet," Slottje said.
