

## Power plant, neighbors continue working on compliance issues

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson  
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COBB &dash; A Thursday evening meeting continued a discussion between Bottle Rock Power Plant operators and neighbors over issues associated with the plant's operation and adherence to its original use permit.

Supervisor Rob Brown led the meeting, which ran more than two hours, at Cobb's Little Red Schoolhouse. It followed a previous gathering on Oct. 30. About two dozen people attended, including plant representatives, neighbors and county officials.

The plant has been back in operation for a year and a half, and sump ponds, plant noise, speed of trucks moving in and out, grading and overall environmental management have been points of contention between local residents and the facility's operators.

On Thursday night Brown introduced Melissa Floyd, an independent planning consultant who has worked with the county for several years.

On Dec. 3 the Board of Supervisors will consider approving a contract with Floyd to act as the county's geothermal project coordinator, a proposal that was made at the last meeting by Hamilton Hess, chair of the Friends of Cobb Mountain.

Since that meeting, Brown said he believes a lot of progress has been made in resolving the issues. &ldquo;Even though we have quite a ways to go I think we're headed in the right direction here.&rdquo;

Brown said the county was trying to balance the importance of the jobs geothermal provides with environmental concerns.

&ldquo;I'm just going to lay it out there right now, Lake County has one of the highest unemployment rates in the state,&rdquo; said Brown.

He said the county doesn't want to add to unemployment but also also doesn't want to compromise environmental integrity. &ldquo;It's essential that we all work together to make sure it's accomplished in a reasonable manner.&rdquo;

During a presentation by Cobb residents, Hess said the plant's neighbors are approaching the situation with a spirit of cooperation &dash; &ldquo;because we are one community.&rdquo;

Hess said the neighbors were most concerned with the steamfield's development, which he called &ldquo;a heavily industrial operation.&rdquo;

All of the problems have a solution, said Hess, which can be found in the plant's use permit issued two decades ago. It has neither been fully enforced nor completely followed.

Neighbor Kelly Fletcher, who lives on High Valley Road halfway up to the plant, spent about an hour going over a list of questions concerning a wide range of issues &dash; from the speed of trucks on the road, and the number of vehicles allowed into the site, to specifics on site development and mitigating environmental damage.

Reid Morgan, asset manager for Bottle Rock Power, was on hand to address Fletcher's questions and those posted by others.

He said a speed sign has been put in at one area of High Valley Road, with a second one with image capture capability to be placed closer to Fletcher's home. That will allow the plant to enforce a policy that results in employee termination if they don't follow speed rules on the road.

Neighbor Gerri Finn asked Morgan if any monitoring has been going on, which is called for in the use permit. He said there had been no way of doing it. Finn disagreed, saying they could have had an employee monitor it. &ldquo;I would like it in the record that there's been no monitoring,&rdquo; she said.

One key item for Fletcher was mud from the drills and its placement on a meadow in the area. He and other neighbors questioned if the materials were toxic. Morgan said the soils in the area would be tested, but all of the mud had been removed.

Area residents also asked county officials to consider handing out citations to the plant to create a record of use permit violations.

Fletcher said since the last meeting sound barriers had been constructed around the drills, which are helping.

Morgan, who recently was assigned to the plant, said those sound barriers needed to be improved and properly designed. &ldquo;Even though they work effectively we've got to do even better and we will.&rdquo;

Returning to the issue of the sump mud, which is material taken from the drills, Fletcher asked if it was hazardous. Ron Yoder, an associate resource planner with the county's Community Development Department, said the materials tested below hazardous levels.

Morgan said the materials weren't hazardous but the plant's operators decided to be cautious and take them to a hazardous materials dump. &ldquo;We are overconservative but I'm glad of that,&rdquo; he said. &ldquo;I have found nothing to show that we have not done what we were supposed to.&rdquo;

Fletcher asked for a record of testing on the materials, which Yoder said he could provide as long as it's not information that's considered proprietary. Community Development Director Rick Coel said he could get a legal opinion from County Counsel Anita Grant in an effort to release the informatin.

Karon Thomas, the plant's compliance manager, said they knew of the neighbor's concerns about the materials and so decided to take them to a landfill in order to increase the neighbors' comfort level.

According to Fletcher, the neighbors also are concerned about water quality and possible contamination of their groundwater from the sump materials. Thomas said if they want their wells tested, they can e-mail her and she'll set up third-party testing.

Residents also questioned if the plant would move to sumplless operation. Morgan said that on Monday he'll meet with ThermaSource, a Santa Rosa company that does the plant's drilling, to begin the process of finding out what's involved with such a conversion. "It's called due diligence &ndash; I'm just starting the process."

David Coleman, another plant neighbor who has been outspoken in his criticism of operations, said he's narrowed his concerns to the sumps, which he said have serious problems.

Brown asked Morgan what would happen if the sumps were filled up. Morgan said they have a permit to move liquids from one sump pond to another, which they're doing with hoses.

Coleman said they can only move the liquids with rigid piping; Thomas said they use heavy hoses.

Brown asked plant officials about what they do with the solid materials that come out of the sumps. Thomas said they dewater the solids and use the liquids for injection in the wells, while the solids are tested and disposed of properly at a landfill.

Coleman asked about the integrity of the sumps after excavators clean them out. Thomas said they can't take core samples because the samples could weaken the sumps' integrity. Instead, a testing company is taking samples around the outside of the ponds.

She said the sump ponds have a 2-foot clay liner, which Coleman said is too thin according to the use permit. He added that the sumps look completely different than they did a few years ago.

Yoder showed slides of the plant's grounds, pointing out erosion control measures which he said had been well done, and areas where berms from grading were removed and flattened to return the land to a natural state.

Morgan agreed that the sumps are a priority. "We're not going to do it wrong again."

The neighbors asked for another meeting. Brown asked Floyd to set a time frame for preparing for it.

"The first thing I want to do is get on site and be able to do a very detailed site inspection and get up to speed on all of the issues," said Floyd, which will then allow her to set up a meeting.

Brown suggested tentatively scheduling the next gathering for the middle of January.

Coel explained that Floyd will be responsible for a "whole list of things" as geothermal coordinator, including monitoring projects, setting up community meetings, conducting permit reviews and assisting with watching mitigation measures.

She'll also help with selecting a consultant to conduct an environmental impact report on a steamfield expansion Bottle Rock Power is proposing.

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