

Experts debate at solid waste forum

By WILL HEATH
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PELL CITY — “We already have a huge landfill that’s accepting all of St. Clair County’s waste. Why would we want another facility that’s going to bring more garbage into our county? What’s in it for the citizens?”

The question — posed by Moody resident Carol Watson — was essentially the core of Friday’s Solid Waste Forum at the Pell City Center. The forum was the second of its kind — a similar debate took place a week prior — and once again featured representatives from Plasma Waste Recycling as well as Veolia Environmental Services.

Plasma — and its parent company, Southeast Ecological and Energy Services — entered into a contract with St. Clair County in late January, with the agreement contingent upon at least five of the county’s municipalities agreeing to send its garbage to PWR’s new plasma gasification facility. Veolia — which handles garbage and maintains two landfills in the county — has raised strenuous objections to the agreement.

In response to the many questions posed by the county’s municipal officials, the Birmingham Regional Planning Commission facilitated Friday’s discussion, the second of its kind (the first was held earlier this month at Jefferson State Community College in Pell City). Steve Ostaseski from the RPC served as the moderator.

The conversation featured scientists and lawyers on either side, debating the ins and outs both of the process and the agreement. Students from various classes at Pell City High also attended.

Forum debate centered around three main topics.

• **Technology.** Is the plasma gasification process proposed by SEES a viable one? Dr. Lou Circeo — director of Plasma Research at Georgia Tech — argued that it is indeed viable, and in use around the world.

“I take some issue with people saying it’s an unproven technology,” he said. “I’ve been around gasifying since 1971 and done work in laboratories around the world.”

“I don’t think everybody here is informed about the long history of the process. Several studies say it’s the best process available.”

Experts for Veolia disagree. University of Alabama chemical engineering professor Martin McKinley informed the audience that only two plants use the technology, both relocated in Japan, and both use the process on a much smaller scale than what has been proposed for St. Clair County.

The overall result is incineration, he said. “It’s a novel form of incineration, but it’s still incineration.”

Further, McKinley and Veolia area manager Scott Corley allege that the environmental effects could be more

harmful than any risks currently posed by a landfill by taking solid waste and turning it into air pollutants.

Plasma vice chairman of research and technology Rod Vera disagrees.

“Plasma has a long history of use in the cleanup of hazardous wastes,” he said. “The waste will not end up in the atmosphere.”

Vera also says the facility will also not have some of the negative aspects of landfills: aspects like noise and smell. SEES representative Charles Moseley also said his company intends to conduct a 6-month feasibility study before construction on the facility.

Environmental attorney James Noles — representing Veolia — says Plasma’s information is misleading.

“They (Plasma) are looking for you in St. Clair County to be guinea pigs for this project,” he said. “Basically, it’s a new, unproven technology versus something that’s proven and regulated.”

• **Cost.** According to Noles, the contract signed by the county and SEES calls for increased tipping fees, from \$22 per ton (the current fee charged by Veolia) to \$37 per ton. McKinley said Veolia’s tipping fees are low, compared to the national average.

“The average fee in the South is \$35 per ton,” he said. “(Veolia’s contract) is low even for the region. Incineration typically costs \$60 per ton.”

Noles added that Veolia pays \$200,000 per year in hosting fees for its current landfills, and that revenue would be lost if the amount of garbage processed there goes down.

Moseley said the \$37 per ton figure in the contract was based on what they understood to be current tipping fees, and that it could be reworked to suit the county’s needs. At previous meetings, Moseley and Vera informed various governing bodies that PWR and SEES would guarantee citizens’ garbage costs for six years.

Vera said the facility would bring in approximately 50 high-paying jobs to the county, while Moseley much of the revenue and benefit from the process occurs “on the back end,” with the products and energy that can be produced through gasification.

Moseley told the audience that Veolia is “concerned with their own finance, not the citizens’.”

• **Legality.** Noles and Veolia maintained Friday that the agreement signed by the county and Plasma is an illegal one, as the county did not put the service through a legal bid process. Further, Plasma’s insistence that the contract could be re-negotiated left his company “chasing a moving target.”

“All we’re asking for here is a level playing field,” he said. “The contract doesn’t speak of a \$100 million facility — it speaks of a \$120 million facility. It doesn’t speak in terms of \$22 per ton, but \$37 per ton.”

Furthermore, Noles and Veolia have alleged that the county is engaging in de facto flow control, already deemed illegal by the Supreme Court.

“It is illegal for the government to direct waste to a private facility,” he said. “My client, Veolia, participated in the bid process, won the bid and was awarded a legal contract by the cities and the county. That contract comes up for approval every three years.”

Moseley said the contract was pushed through quickly in an effort to obtain a \$20 million federal grant that may be available later this year.

“We’re not going to spend \$1 million if we don’t have a contract,” he said. “We have to work together with the cities and the county to make it all work.”

Representatives from both sides said they would be amenable to a partnership.

“We’re not here to pick fights,” Plasma CEO Terry Moore said. “We’re happy to work with (Veolia).”

“This is a good lesson for the students about how business works: two sides that disagree can work together.”

Veolia area manager Scott Corley agreed with Moore’s assessment of the situation.

“We would’ve like to have known about it beforehand,” he said. “But we’re open to this kind of stuff, and we’re always researching new technologies.”