

Generating Controversy

Plant opponents, proponents go head-to-head

BY MONICA KEEN
STAFF WRITER

A hammer has yet to hit a nail on a proposed coal-fired power plant in Sallisaw, but it's already generating controversy and bringing division among some in the county.

On one side of the fight are community leaders who see the economic impact that a \$1 billion plant and industry could have on the entire county, including additional property tax funds for a county that has in the past struggled to make ends meet.

On the other side, opponents dismiss the numbers and point to the costs incurred if the health of residents is compromised. They worry about the pollution that the plant will emit — no matter what controls are in place.

While proponents trust the government to enforce environmental standards that are in place to protect them, opponents worry about the pollution that can't be seen and argue that residents must protect themselves.

PROponents

Sallisaw Mayor Shannon Vann is one of the many in the county

who sees the long-term economic benefits of an industry as large as the one proposed by Tenaska.



Vann

Vann said he is optimistic about the long-term investment that the plant is making in the community, as well as the short-term investment from

the more than the 1,000 people expected to be employed during the four-year construction of the plant. He said even if those workers aren't local people, those people will still be renting property, buying food, and shopping in local stores and businesses.

"The money will benefit the tax base of the county as a whole," he said.

Historically in the county when looking at major construction projects, like Kerr Lock and Dam, families ended up relocating to the area, building homes and putting down roots, which Vann thinks might happen again.

He said Tenaska's background also shows they are good corporate citizens.

"I think it will be a very big positive," he said of the Sallisaw plant.

As far as the environmental impact, Vann said he has personally done a lot of research on the subject.



Mills

He said the industry has made significant progress over the years, especially since the 1950s and 1960s, at reducing emissions, and controlling any type of pollution source. Vann also points to better regulations by the government, and an acknowledgement by the industry of the need for change and being responsible to the environment by minimizing impact.

"Any industry or business will have some type of impact on the environment," Vann said.

Vann said today's consumers are demanding more and more electricity, and what some people don't know is that 85 percent or more of Sallisaw's power comes from coal. Sallisaw buys its power from the Grand River Dam Authority (GRDA). GRDA officials have said they have no part in Tenaska's plans and do not plan on being a customer of Tenaska.

Tenaska is still negotiating with a potential power customer, Vann

said, noting that no final decisions have been made.



Weddle

"If everything works out with their customer, I feel fairly confident they'll want to build here," Vann said.

Tenaska officials have said that they are not in competition with retail providers and they will sell only wholesale to utilities within the region who will in turn sell it to end-use residential and business customers. Those customers, Tenaska said, will be within the state and other nearby states. Tenaska officials have said that the electrical output of the plant will enhance the operation of the regional power grid.

Vann said there is no doubt that more electricity will be produced in this country and sees a benefit of having it produced in the local area.

"It's in our best interest to have as much electricity as possible — to keep it at a level you and I want to pay," Vann said.

"Even though we don't buy electricity directly from this customer, it will help keep our prices

affordable in the future."

If GRDA doesn't have enough power to meet customers' needs, like Sallisaw's need, they will have to go in the open market and buy power, which means paying a higher price, Vann said.



Edwards

If there is a shortage of electricity regionwide, the cost gets passed down to the customers, he said.

"We all pay when there's not enough electricity being generated in the country," Vann said.

Cheryl Mills, president of the Sallisaw Chamber of Commerce and the marketing and member services representative for Cookson Hills Electric Cooperative, agrees with Vann about the need for more electricity in the future.

Mills said for the rural electric cooperatives 70 percent of power comes from coal-fired plants.

She said there are people who don't want it, but they live in rural areas and depend on rural electric to get power.

"I feel like we're going to have to do something for power in the future," she said, noting that more

power plants will have to be built.

While Mills agrees that these type of plants are not 100 percent pollution-free, she said with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) standards, there is not as much pollution.



Dobbs

"It's getting better all the time," she said.

While Mills said she doesn't have a problem with the Sallisaw plant, she does understand that others have issues.

She said as far as the jobs it creates, there may not be a whole lot of jobs going to local people, but the people who work on it while it's being built will come from other places. She said those people will still have to live somewhere, shop somewhere, buy clothes and food, and some may end up staying.

"It's going to be a boost to the economy," she said.

OPponents

Dr. John Weddle, an emergency room doctor at Sparks Regional Medical Center in Fort Smith, Ark., who lives in Sequoyah

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Landowners voice pros, cons of Sallisaw, Panama plants

BY MONICA KEEN
STAFF WRITER

Even from the highway, the water vapor rising from a row of short, stocky cooling towers at Panama's coal-fired power plant is hard to miss when entering the town from the north. The puffing of vapor that is reminiscent of cigar smoke reaches a certain point and then vanishes into the sky.

On the right side of U.S. Highway 59 heading south into the town, towering power lines stretch for miles, contrasting with the varying shades of the fall landscape.

The AES Shady Point power plant, which straddles Panama and Spiro, has been a presence in the sleepy community since 1991, when it began operations.

Semi-trucks carrying coal covered with tarps hustle down the winding road that leads to the plant. The road itself shows its heavy use, worn from the truck tires. In a 10-minute span, six trucks, carrying the life force of the plant, make their way down the road.

The truck traffic seems to be one of the drawbacks for residents living in the town. Your TIMES was unable to reach a spokesperson for AES' corporate office for comment.

At one of the homes at the beginning of AES Shady Point Road, where Joyce Cando and her husband have resided since 1980, the Candos have seen what it was like before and after the plant came in.

"I wish it wasn't here," Joyce Cando said.

Cando said they get a lot of coal dust from the trucks passing by, and she described a type of haziness that hovers over her home in the mornings. The trucks, she said, start at 4 or 5 a.m., and roar past her

home all day.

She said that she and others tried to fight the plant building there. "We kept hearing what all it would do for us," Cando said, adding that she didn't think it had done much, but it probably helps financially.

"Everybody fought it for awhile," she said. "Then we just gave in."

If she had to do it all over again, Cando said she wouldn't give in.

"I wouldn't want to move by one," she said.

Cando said her husband had open-heart surgery four years ago and since then he has had breathing problems. She alluded that she thought the plant could have had an effect on her husband's problems.

Despite her objections, Cando seems resigned to the fact that she lives within miles of a coal-fired plant.

"We can't do nothing about it," she said.

When asked if she knew whether her property value had changed since the plant came in, she said she didn't know because they haven't tried to sell their property since moving there.

"How could it raise your property (value)?" she asked. "It would probably go down."

Others in the community disagree with Cando and see the plant as a source of jobs for residents in a town where high-paying jobs are scarce.

Alfred and Janice Monks, who live farther down the road from Cando, agreed that the plant has created jobs.

"It puts a lot of people to work," Alfred said. "It would be for the better of the community."

Living on the road leading to the plant is another story. Janice said one of the bad points is that it's dusty. She added that most of the trucks keep

the coal covered.

The Monks built their home in 1987, four years before the plant began operations, and Janice said she doesn't know if the value of her property has changed since that time.

The leaders of the Sequoyah County Clean Air Coalition have claimed that property values will plummet in the county if the coal plant moves in Sallisaw.

"If I had to choose, I'd rather live next to this than a chicken house," she said.

Janice said no black smoke comes from the plant and she has grown accustomed to the trucks. She noted that there is very little traffic on the week-ends.

The traffic is a concern of another resident. Patricia Pierce, who is from Oklahoma City, said she has lived in the town for a year and has no problems with the plant, except for the traffic. She has children ranging in age from five months to 14 years old and is worried for their safety.

"The truckers drive really fast," she said. "That's the only issue I have."

Ashley Olsen, 23, who grew up in the Spiro, Panama area, said the plant doesn't bother her either.

"It's good jobs for people," Olsen said.

She said that she knows people who work at the plant. She goes to school with a man who was making minimum wage and trying to raise a family when he recently got a job at the plant, and now has a good job.

When asked about the haze that another resident mentioned, Olsen said, "It doesn't get that way very often."

Less than 30 miles away, in Sequoyah County, another coal-fired power plant is planned adjacent to the Sallisaw Landfill,

this one by Omaha, Neb.-based Tenaska Inc. Unlike AES, truck traffic won't be a problem at the Sallisaw plant.

Tenaska officials said truck transportation of coal won't be associated with the Sallisaw project because the coal for the Sallisaw plant will be delivered by rail directly to the site with no stop-off points. Tenaska officials said the company will build a rail infrastructure at the power plant site to accommodate the 100-plus car trains that will be bringing coal to the plant five days a week. The tracks will be built from the existing rail lines in the area to the nearby plant site.

The private location of the land for the proposed Sallisaw plant may be one of the key advantages over the Panama plant. Despite no homes being located along the road leading to the landfill and two ridges on either side, neighboring landowners have varying opinions about the plant.

Ann Taylor and her husband, Charles, own a house and 216 acres west of the proposed site. Taylor said she hasn't read the latest news about the plant, and she said she needed more information before she would give her opinion.

"I'm not really thrilled with the idea," she said.

But she said that she would like to see both sides before making more comments, saying that she realizes there are pros and cons to every issue.

What she is most worried about is whether the plant would be safe in the long-term for residents and for livestock.

"None of us are getting any younger," she said.

Jesse and Kathy Fargo, who own hundreds of acres south of the plant, are both adamantly against the plant locating in Sallisaw. Jesse said from their property is one and a half miles from the city-owned property, with Pine Mountain separating them.

"We are very close neighbors," Kathy said. "I don't like it. I don't like it at all."

Because they don't live in the city, Kathy said they don't have any say in it.

Her husband Jesse said, "I'm against it 100 percent."

What Jesse said people need to consider are the power lines going out of the plant.

Tenaska official Mike Lebens said they will have to build a sub-station facility at the power plant site and if lines have to be built they will build them. Bill Braudt, Tenaska Inc.'s general manager for business development, said in October that whether they will have to upgrade the lines is one of the studies being done. He said most likely they will have to do upgrades to the system, and they will pay for them. Braudt said their hope is to use the existing rights-of-way and lines.

Power lines are a big problem with Jesse Fargo. If they do build it, he said he hopes that the power lines go straight across Sallisaw.

"Give someone else a taste of this," he said.

Jesse said he is also worried about the possible health effects.

"I don't think it's good for anybody," he said.

Jesse said he first learned about the proposed plant on the news.

Water vapor from the AES Shady Point power plant near Panama can be seen from a distance when entering the town from the north.

MONICA KEEN • TIMES

