



MARCELLUS WATCH | PETER MANTIUS

Perfect targets

Both sides of the white-hot gas drilling debate agree that any day now, Gov. Andrew Cuomo will allow high-volume hydrofracking of shale gas formations in certain sections of upstate New York.

The Cuomo team appears ready to limit fracking to five counties along the Pennsylvania border where geological prospects are good and pro-fracking sentiment runs strong: Steuben, Chemung, Tioga, Broome and Chenango.

The governor would permit it first in communities that express support for the controversial drilling technology, according to a recent article in *The New York Times* that has been widely interpreted as Cuomo's trial balloon.

That plan sounds sounds reasonable enough until you take a closer look. Then it becomes clear that there are no towns that are authentically pro-fracking. In fact, the gas drilling debate splits communities just as effectively as fracking cracks open shale rock.

Consider Wheeler, a town of about 1,300 people eight miles north of the Steuben County seat of Bath.

Wheeler has a substantial Amish population that relies on organic farming and a vocal group of other residents who are ardently anti-fracking.

But their political interests are represented by a town board dominated by members who stand to reap personal financial gain from gas development.

At a town meeting May 14, speaker after speaker urged the board to enact a ban or moratorium on gas drilling. They expressed fears that heavy well drilling, pipeline construction and truck traffic would industrialize the rural area and contaminate local groundwater.

The Amish typically avoid public town hall meetings that begin with an all-stand Pledge of Allegiance to the flag and

often unravel into rancorous debate.

But a lean, bearded Amish community leader broke with tradition to attend the May 14 board meeting out of concern that drilling could render his community unsuitable for organic farming. For nearly two hours, he sat in a back corner next to his driver and listened in silence.

Neil Vitale, a representative of the Steuben County Landowners Coalition, wasn't so shy.

Though he doesn't live in Wheeler and was clearly outnumbered by Wheeler residents who disagreed with him, Vitale boldly appealed to the board to endorse local gas drilling.

His landowner coalition, like many that have sprung up in western New York, is made up of members who have leased their property to drillers and are hoping to cash in on gas development.

His coalition-drafted resolution was a cookie-cutter version of ones passed in Bath and a handful of other nearby towns. It signaled that Wheeler opposed any local ban or moratorium on fracking. It's exactly the kind of signal – or political cover – Cuomo is angling for.

When Vitale spoke up, he was preaching to the choir. Like Vitale, four of the five Wheeler board members had leased their land to gas drillers.

Although the board was reluctant to pass the coalition resolution that night because the town attorney was absent, the matter was held it over for reconsideration June 11.

Before the vote at the June meeting, the board listened as a letter signed by 30 residents opposed to gas drilling was read aloud. It asked those board members with gas leases to refrain from voting on gas issues.

"To (vote) would violate their responsibilities as Town Board members to act in the interest of all the residents of the town, and not their own personal interest, when their personal interest is in conflict

with the interests of other residents in the Town," the letter said.

The board rejected that plea for recusal and voted 4-1 to signal its support for gas drilling. The 'no' vote came from the only board member who didn't appear in local land records as a gas drilling leaser.

Since then, representatives of six towns that represent the majority of land in the Keuka Lake watershed have written the Wheeler board asking it to reconsider. They stress that the harsh industrial effects of fracking – especially groundwater contamination – do not stop at the Wheeler town line. Those effects threaten Keuka Lake's wine/tourism/farming economy.

"This major industrialization of your rural area will impact not only your town, but also the entire watershed," the letter said, noting that Bath and Wheeler were the only towns in the watershed that have not enacted a ban or launched the process to enact one.

While anti-frackers dominate wine country, landowner coalitions tend to hold sway in Steuben and the four other Pennsylvania border counties that Cuomo is targeting for gas drilling. Even in Wheeler, gas leasing is very common, and the dominance of anti-drilling sentiment displayed at public meetings does not necessarily extend to the community at large.

So to Cuomo, Wheeler looks like a perfect target.

To those who question his judgment, he can always point to the town board's vote. And he can count on the Amish to accept their fate quietly.

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