

News

Power Play

Whose job is it to make sure a controversial Springfield biomass plant is safe?

By Maureen Turner

Thursday, January 27, 2011

Like many Springfield residents, Walter Kroll says, when he first heard about a proposal to build a power plant in the East Springfield neighborhood, he assumed that government officials were in the best position to decide whether the project would be right for the city.

As his thinking went, Kroll recently said, "If it's a bad thing for the community, the people in charge aren't going to let it happen. ... Naively, I think everyone kind of put their trust into [the government approval process]."

Now, more than two years after the Springfield City Council approved a special permit for the plant, he and many other residents are questioning that process. The McKnight Neighborhood Council, of which Kroll is president, is one of a number of community and health groups that have formed a grassroots organization with the pointed name Stop Toxic Incineration in Springfield. Its goal: to stop the plant from being built.



Illustration By Mark Roessler

The \$150 million, 35-megawatt power plant, to be built by a group called Palmer Renewable Energy at 1000 Page Boulevard, would burn almost 1,200 tons of wood chips a day, converting that energy into electricity. The project's proponents describe it as the kind of sustainable energy production we need as we attempt to move away from dependence on fossil fuel. They also point out that the plant would create dozens of jobs and generate significant tax revenue (as much as \$1 million a year, by one city official's estimate)—two things the city could always use more of.

But the plant's growing number of critics contend that the project would be a public health nightmare, with toxic emissions and exhaust from diesel delivery trucks adding to air pollution in a region already plagued by poor air quality and the health problems that typically accompany it. Springfield is considered an "environmental justice community," a government designation given to communities recognized as needing extra assistance in protecting their environment and public health.

Nonetheless, input on the project from state agencies has not been as broad as Kroll and other residents were counting on. Recent changes made to the plan by the developers, while eliminating one major source of toxic emissions, also mean the project will be spared certain government reviews; in the fall, a Patrick administration official announced that an environmental impact report would not be required for the plant, to the great anger of opponents.

"In the beginning, I think everybody was saying the same thing: 'The state wouldn't let this happen if it was a bad thing,'" Kroll said last week. "But guess what? They did."

Now, he said, it's time for local officials to step up. "The single best place to put our energy right now is the City Council," Kroll said. "We'd like to see them stand up much more, honestly, than they have."

Response from city officials, however, has been mixed, with some maintaining they're powerless to do anything, and others worried about the threat of a lawsuit if they stop the project now.

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The proposed plant is a project of Palmer Renewable Energy LLC, a limited liability corporation based in Palmer and organized in 2005. Its resident agent and manager is David J. Callahan, who is also president of the family-run Palmer Paving Corporation. (Palmer Paving owns the property on which the plant is to be built, and already has an asphalt plant there.) According to a corporate website, Palmer Paving and Barletta Engineering, based in Canton, are working in partnership, under the name Caletta Renewable Energy, to develop the plant.

"Caletta Renewable Energy's mission is to make a positive impact on communities throughout the world by developing, building and managing independent renewable energy power plants around the globe," according to the website. "Generation of electricity and heat from renewable resources provides environmental and financial benefits to communities. Through the creation of sustainable energy sources, employment opportunities and economic development, diverse communities benefit from an enhanced quality of life—at work and at home."

The *Advocate* left messages seeking interviews with Victor Gatto, project manager for the PRE plant, and Frank Fitzgerald, the developer's attorney in Springfield. Neither responded.

The Springfield project received a special permit from the City Council in September of 2008. At the time, the developers told councilors the plant would create 50 full-time jobs, and offered a number of other perks to the city, called "host community benefits." Those benefits included \$667,000 from the company to make local improvements, such as road paving, new street lights and the demolition of the old firehouse on Page Boulevard and Roosevelt Avenue, and \$25,000 for environmental programs in the city schools. PRE also committed to giving preference to Springfield residents in hiring decisions.

David Panagore, the city's chief development officer at the time, spoke in favor of the project, assuring councilors that the plant would have to undergo a strict environmental review by the state before it could be built. Panagore also said at the meeting that the project would generate at least \$200,000—and possibly as much as \$1 million—a year in tax revenue for the city.

The Council approved the permit by a vote of 7 to 2, with Councilors Rosemarie Mazza Moriarty and Patrick Markey casting the two dissenting votes. Mazza Moriarty, citing concerns about possible ill effects from the plant, tried to get the matter sent to committee for further study but failed to get enough votes to do so.

While Mazza Moriarty's concerns found limited sympathy among her fellow councilors, they were shared by a number of residents. Stop Toxic Incineration in Springfield counts among its supporters neighborhood groups like the McKnight Council and the East Forest Park Civic Association, activist organizations such as Arise for Social Justice and the local chapter of the Mass. Senior Action Council, and public health and environmental groups including the Mass. Medical Society, the Hampden District Medical Society, the Pioneer Valley Asthma Coalition, the Mass. Breast Cancer Coalition and the Pioneer Valley chapter of Physicians for Social Responsibility. Last month, the presidents of Springfield, Western New England and American International colleges released a joint letter calling on the City Council to revoke the 2008 permit and start a new permitting process in light of changes made to the original plans for the plant.

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Those original plans called for the plant to burn both wood chips and construction and demolition, or "C and D," waste. The plan to use C and D material—which the developers have since dropped—was of particular concern to opponents, given the potential for that kind of waste to release into the environment toxins such as arsenic and lead.

In a November, 2009 statement opposing the Springfield plant, the Mass. Breast Cancer Coalition noted the connection between toxic chemicals such as dioxin and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons and increased risk of breast cancer.

"Burning construction and demolition debris releases toxic chemicals into our air, which ultimately can lead to diseases such as breast cancer," the MBCC said. "Furthermore, Springfield already has a disproportionately high number of polluting facilities contributing to higher rates of disease."

Indeed, much of the opposition to the plant focuses on the already poor air quality in the city (and the region as a whole) and the associated health problems. The Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, whose work includes efforts to reduce sprawl and overdevelopment, says that "air quality in the Pioneer Valley is among the worst in the nation," noting its high level of ozone, which is linked to elevated asthma rates, among other health concerns.

Poor air quality is a concern for the entire Valley, whose bowl shape serves as a holder for emissions from plants and other sources near and far. Indeed, it's somewhat surprising that residents of other communities haven't weighed in more vocally on the Palmer Renewable Energy plant, which would sit, for instance, not far from the Chicopee border. Still, some opponents worry especially about the potential effects on Springfield, given the city's particular public health struggles.

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Springfield is considered an Environmental Justice Community by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, a designation that allows nonprofits in the city to qualify for grants "to improve environmental conditions in underserved communities." Just last week, the EPA awarded an \$87,400 grant to the city's Healthy Environment, Healthy Springfield Coalition to identify and prioritize the city's biggest environmental risks. According to the EPA, "Some of the environmental health concerns that the Springfield community faces are poor air quality (point [and] mobile sources), home indoor air quality, lead, hazardous waste, pesticides and drinking, surface and ground water."

The Mass. Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, or EEA—the same agency, ironically, that ruled that the Palmer Renewable Energy plant would not be subject to an environmental impact report—also identifies Springfield as an environmental justice community, eligible for certain state assistance. "Through its agencies and programs, EEA works to engage environmental justice populations in environmental decision-making through expanded and inclusive outreach, to minimize health risks through targeted environmental enforcement, and to improve environmental quality in all communities through initiatives that include reduction of pollutants and emissions..." according to information from the state.

(To be considered an environmental justice community in Massachusetts, a community must have a median household income of 65 percent or less of the statewide median, or at least 25 percent of its population must be members of a minority group, foreign-born, or lacking English language proficiency. Springfield meets all four criteria.)

In a letter opposing the PRE plant, Matthew Sadof, chairman of the Pioneer Valley Asthma Coalition and a pediatrician at Baystate Medical Center, noted that while the PVAC serves the entire region, the group "focuses many of its activities on Springfield because of high rates of asthma, large asthma health disparities and the many environmental injustices that contribute to these disparities."

According to Sadof's letter, about 20 percent of kids in the Springfield public schools have asthma, compared to 10.8 percent of kids

statewide. And Hispanic and African-American residents are much more likely to be hospitalized for asthma problems than their white neighbors, he added.

"Springfield is a designated environmental justice community and its poor air quality has already been linked to these high asthma rates. This plant will place community members at even higher risk," wrote Sadof, who noted the large number of schools near the plant site. (A graphic on the Stop Toxic Incineration in Springfield website shows 55 schools within a five-mile radius of the proposed plant.)

"I strongly suggest instead that Springfield look to wind and solar energy projects that will employ community members and provide energy to our community," Sadof's letter concluded.

In December of 2009, the Mass. Medical Society announced a policy opposing the Springfield plant and two other biomass power plants proposed in Western Mass. (in Russell and Greenfield) "on the grounds that biomass power plants pose an unacceptable risk to the public's health by increasing air pollution."

The MMS statement quoted Jefferson Dickey, a doctor at the Community Health Center of Franklin County and one of the authors of the policy. "Air pollution is a common and noxious mixture of gases, particles, [and] liquids, the vast majority of which comes from power plants, industrial furnaces and high-temperature industrial processes, and transportation, such as buses, trucks, cars, and small engines," Dickey said. "Epidemiologists have long recognized that air pollution is associated with an increased risk of a broad range of medical problems, from asthma attacks and decreased lung growth in children to increased lung disease exacerbations, emergency room use, hospitalization rates, heart attacks, and death rates in adults.

"Recent research and medical literature reviews provide graphic confirmation of the seriousness of the issue," Dickey's statement continued. "The equation is simple: the more air pollution, the higher the mortality rate."

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Last fall, Palmer Renewable Energy announced a significant change to its project: the company was dropping plans to burn construction and demolition waste at the plant.

In a Notice of Project Change filed on Sept. 29 with the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, the developers wrote: "The project will use all green wood chips in place of recycled wood from Construction & Demolition processors and other changes resulting in reduced air emissions."

According to the filing, "The proposed project will include measures to reduce air quality impacts, noise, water use, wastewater impact, stormwater runoff, traffic and visual impacts," including "a full array of emission controls" to "minimize air quality impacts."

Under the original plan, the plant would have burned 900 tons of wood a day: 700 tons of construction and demolition waste and 200 tons of wood chips. The new plan, according to the state filing, calls for the burning of 1,184 tons of wood chips, to be supplied by Palmer-based Northern Tree Service. "The [chips] will be limited to clean (uncontaminated) non-forest woody material, such as tree stems, branches, stumps and brush," from sources including private landscapers, land-clearing and excavation firms, developers and municipal parks departments, the developer wrote.

The Notice of Project Change—which included a new expected completion date of December, 2012—noted several other results of the changes, including a small increase in the number of daily truck trips to the plant (from 134 to 140), a reduction in the plant's total electrical output from 38 megawatts to 35, and a reduction in its water use from about 115,000 gallons a day to 91,000 gallons.

In addition, the developers wrote, emissions of "hazardous air pollutants" (a government-generated list of pollutants linked to health risks) would drop from 23.8 tons per year to 13.9 tons. Perhaps most significant, the changes would reduce emissions of two compounds created during the combustion process, both of which pose serious human health risks: nitrogen oxide and carbon monoxide. Under the new plan, the amount of nitrogen oxide emitted by the plant would drop from 134 tons per year to 49.4 tons, while the amount of carbon monoxide would drop from 167 tons per year to 99.5 tons.

Projects whose emissions exceed 50 tons per year of nitrogen oxide, or 100 tons per year of carbon monoxide, are considered to be a "major source" of these emissions and are required to undergo a Major Comprehensive Air Plan Approval process through the Mass. Department of Environmental Protection. By reducing its nitrogen oxide and carbon monoxide emissions to just below these thresholds—each emission would now miss the threshold by about half a ton per year—the Springfield plant would no longer have to undergo that approval process, instead qualifying for a less-stringent "non-major" approval process.

The Notice of Project Change, like the initial plan, was subject to a public comment period. The city of Springfield submitted as its comment a report it commissioned from Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, a national engineering and planning firm with an office in Springfield. The VHB report recommended that PRE be required to provide additional information on certain aspects of its plan. In order "to ensure forestland is not utilized as a & fuel source," VHB suggested, the developer should be required to provide evidence that all the wood chips it intends to burn come from "certified sustainable supplies."

In addition, the VHB report said, the developer's Notice of Project Change did not provide enough information to "prove that the facility will be carbon neutral," as claimed. "Even if the facility were to be considered carbon neutral, it does not represent a 20 percent reduction in [greenhouse gas] emission [a target set under the Mass. Global Warming Solutions Act of 2008]," the report said. "[T]herefore, we recommend mitigation measures to offset [greenhouse gas] emissions."

The VHB analysts also noted that the reduced levels of nitrogen oxide and carbon monoxide would now fall "just below" the levels that would trigger the more thorough DEP approval process. "The project's potential emissions are extremely close to the 'Major Source' thresholds; therefore, consideration of a slightly reduced permitted daily tonnage would result in a more adequate emissions buffer to ensure the project remains a 'Non-Major Source,'" the report said.

In addition, the VHB report noted that neither the original plan for the plant nor the proposed changes "address the fact that the facility will be located within an Environmental Justice Community and health impaired community with asthma and respiratory illness rates significantly greater than other areas of the state. ... No mitigation is proposed to offset the adverse impacts of this facility on these populations."

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As noted in the Vanasse Hangen Brustlin report, the proposed changes to the PRE plant would cause its emissions to fall below the thresholds that would mandate an environmental impact report review by the Mass. EPA. "Therefore, the requirement for MEPA review beyond the [Notice of Project Change] filing itself is at the sole discretion of the Secretary of Energy and Environmental Affairs," the report authors wrote. At the time, the EEA secretary was Ian Bowles.

Two years earlier, Bowles had ruled that the original plan for the plant did not require additional review by MEPA, saying it "sufficiently defined the nature and general elements of the Palmer Renewable Energy project and proposed measures to avoid and mitigate environmental impacts."

Plant opponents—including a reported 450 people who submitted comments to the EEA—hoped that this time Bowles would call for a broader review process. They were soon disappointed: in late November, Bowles ruled that the plant would not need to complete an environmental impact report, saying he was "confident that the project will meet all applicable air quality standards" and noting that emissions would be reduced by an improved air pollution control system and the decision not to burn construction and demolition waste.

Bowles' ruling was "a definitive statement that the project would not harm the environment or public health," Victor Gatto, the project manager for the plant, told the *Springfield Republican*.

Others were less pleased with Bowles' decision. While the project still needs to receive an air quality permit from the Mass. DEP (at deadline, the city was awaiting word on when that process would begin), opponents of the plant were angered to learn that it would not be required to undergo a more far-reaching environmental study.

"After the incinerator developer switched the proposed fuel, the state chose to allow the project to proceed without a full environmental impact report," Stop Toxic Incineration in Springfield said in response to the EEA ruling. "[I]t is hard to believe with that show of support from residents, scientists, non-profit health and environmental organizations, doctors and city councilors, that they could deny the request for an EIR—but they did."

Feeling let down by the state, opponents of the project are calling on the City Council to handle the matter on the local level. Specifically, they want to see councilors revoke the special permit granted to Palmer Renewable Energy in 2008.

Stop Toxic Incineration in Springfield has drafted a form email for sympathizers to send to city councilors, citing a lack of adequate state input on the project: "In 2008, the state promised appropriate oversight and assessment to the city if a special permit was issued to the developers. The state failed to provide this necessary oversight, and now it's up to you to act to protect the health and long-term prospects for our city by revoking this permit," the message reads.

But while the opposition has some allies among individual councilors, it's unclear what the Council as a whole will do—or if it even has the legal authority to do much of anything.

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On paper, at least, it seems that plant opponents have reason to be optimistic about the possibility of persuading the City Council to rescind PRE's special permit. Of the seven councilors who voted to approve the permit in 2008, only four still sit on the City Council, and at least one—Council President Jose Tosado—has changed his position, saying he no longer supports the project. Meanwhile, the constitution of the Council has changed dramatically since that vote, with an expansion from nine to 13 members to accommodate eight ward councilors elected in 2009—a number of whom have voiced their opposition to the plant.

In mid-December, the Council took up the permit question at a meeting attended by a vocal group of plant opponents. Also at the meeting was Frank Fitzgerald, PRE's attorney, who asserted that the Council had no legal grounds for revoking the permit and warned that the developer would sue if that happened.

After listening to public comments, councilors met in executive session to discuss the matter with City Solicitor Ed Pikula. In September, Pikula had issued an advisory opinion that the city had no cause for revoking the permit, warning, "A decision to revoke that is arbitrary or capricious could result in a lawsuit claiming damages."

No vote was taken at the December Council meeting. Now councilors are waiting for an advisory opinion from Pikula on Fitzgerald's contention that changes to the PRE project mean it could move forward even if the permit were pulled, Tosado, the Council president, recently told the *Advocate*.

"We're basically at a standstill," Tosado said. In addition to waiting for Pikula's opinion, the city is also waiting for the Mass. DEP to begin the air quality permit process. That process will begin with the DEP issuing a draft permit, to be followed by a 30-day public comment period. If a permit is issued, Tosado noted, it can be appealed.

Tosado voted in favor of granting PRE its special permit in 2008. "Given the information we received at the time, it seemed like a good idea, to be honest with you," he said, citing the appeal of renewable energy sources.

Since then, Tosado said, more information about the potential effects of the plant have emerged. "We have so much more information available now that in good conscience, it's not something I can support at this point," he said.

But that doesn't mean Tosado is ready to schedule a revocation vote. While Pikula told councilors that PRE's proposed changes create an opportunity for the Council to make some modifications to the 2008 permit, Tosado is mindful of Pikula's warning that a decision to revoke the permit could result in a lawsuit.

And, Tosado added, if Fitzgerald's contention that the project can proceed with or without a permit proves accurate, then the city has to consider whether it would be worth losing the perks—the road improvements, the school funding—the developers committed to when first applying for the permit. "We want to make sure if we revoke the permit, it means something," Tosado said.

At-large Councilor Tim Rooke, who voted in favor of PRE's special permit, said he takes the warning that the city could face a lawsuit for revoking the permit seriously. When councilors issue special permits, Rooke said, their job is to consider the appropriateness of that particular land use. At the time of the vote, he noted, councilors were told that questions pertaining to air quality and other environmental effects would be addressed by the appropriate state officials.

Opponents unhappy with the EEA decision not to require an environmental impact report have a "legitimate gripe," Rooke said. Still, he added, "I think there are concerns, and those concerns will be addressed on the [air quality] permit the state has to issue to them. & I'm in a holding pattern waiting to see what those conditions [imposed by DEP] will be." No one in city government is an expert on the complex issues raised by the building of a power plant, which is why councilors should wait for the state's decision on the air quality permit, Rooke said. "It's in the state's control," he said.

"I try to look at things pragmatically, rather than politically," Rooke added. "I think there's a lot of political saber-rattling going on, which is okay, but I don't think we have any ability to do anything."

Not everyone agrees. Pat Markey—one of the two councilors who voted against the permit in 2008, and city solicitor during the Ryan administration—is now in private practice, and is assisting plant opponents on a volunteer basis. Pointing to the proposed project changes that would drop its emissions to just below the levels that would require a more extensive state review, Markey told the *Advocate*, "I think Palmer Renewable Energy is attempting to do an end run around regulators, and I think the city has every basis for revoking the permit which was issued back in 2008."

Because the developers now want to make changes to their original plan, Markey maintains, the Council has a right to reconsider a new permit based on the new project specifics.

Markey's position is backed by Susan Reid, an attorney and director of the Conservation Law Foundation of Massachusetts. As reported in the *Reminder*, Reid recently sent a letter to Pikula in which she maintained that PRE not only needs a special permit for its plant, it also needs to undergo a new permit application process in light of the changes to the original plan.

"The city unquestionably has the right to revoke a special permit for just cause, and Massachusetts law prohibits any claim for damages that is based upon the issuance, denial, suspension or revocation of any permit, license, certificate, approval, order or similar authorization," Reid wrote in her letter.

Ward 8 City Councilor John Lysak has opposed the Palmer Renewable Energy plant since his campaign for the seat in 2009. "I think it's just bad in general," he said. "This isn't a political issue for me—this is an issue of what's best for the area and for the citizens."

While Lysak's sympathies usually lie in a pro-business direction, he said, the potential jobs and tax revenue created by the plant are not enough to make up for the risks. "If this was coming in, and it was a clean facility, it would be different. But it's not a clean facility. I have my doubts," he said.

Among those doubts: whether the plant could really operate at full capacity using green wood chips only. While Lysak calls PRE's decision to drop the use of construction and demolition waste "a step in the right direction," he wonders if, down the road, the operators will turn their sights back to construction waste.

Lysak said he doesn't take lightly the threat of a lawsuit by PRE's attorney. "I think a lot of people, unfortunately, are afraid. They think we're going to bankrupt the city," he said. "Don't get me wrong: I don't want to make rash decisions. But this is the health and wellbeing of our citizens."

Lysak added, "It's not a five-year deal. This thing is going to be there forever."

In response to an inquiry from the *Advocate*, Mayor Domenic Sarno issued this statement on the PRE matter: "My conditional support has been and continues to be contingent on the proposed facility meeting all stringent federal, state and local environmental, health and safety requirements. My Administration will continue to give conditional support to the proposed biomass plant in the City of Springfield

because it will assist with the creation of new jobs and tax revenues for the City. The City will continue to review any and all information regarding the proposed facility as the process moves forward and will evaluate the information accordingly."

In Sarno's statement, the phrase "conditional support" was in bold type.

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Regardless of their particular positions on the plant, the current and former councilors who spoke to the *Advocate* all emphasized one key point: when the City Council approved PRE's special permit in 2008, it did so with the expectation that the project would receive a comprehensive evaluation by state officials with expertise in relevant safety and environmental issues.

As it turns out, while the project still needs some state approvals—including the forthcoming DEP air quality permit—thanks to the changes announced last fall, it's avoiding others, most notably the environmental impact report. And that's left many in the city anxious about whether the plant will be as thoroughly scrutinized as it should be.

Ward 7 representative Tim Allen joined the City Council in January, 2010, after PRE's special permit had been granted. Prior to joining the Council, Allen served as chairman of the city's Public Health Council, which is appointed by the mayor to advise the administration on health issues. Amazingly, Allen said, the power plant issue never came before the health council before the Council vote.

"That alone shows you the pitiful communications process, how something like that could get approved without going through the Public Health Council," Allen said.

In the fall of 2009, the Public Health Council held hearings on the PRE project. The message received from the public was clear, Allen said: residents wanted to make sure the plant underwent environmental impact and public health studies. And, he said, "All the indications we got were, they were going to take place."

Allen resigned from the Public Health Council when he took his seat on the City Council; now he serves as chairman of the Council's planning and economic development committee. Along with Ward 2 Councilor Mike Fenton, Allen has been advocating for state officials to become more involved in the PRE approval process. "We're on a big due-diligence project," Allen said.

In December, Allen and Fenton, along with city health director Helen Caulton-Harris, met with state officials, including Public Health Commissioner John Auerbach and Suzanne Condon, DPH's director of environmental health, to find out if DPH had any role in deciding whether the PRE plant gets the green light to proceed.

The answer, in short: no.

"The state Department of Public Health has no legal standing since the project has been approved by [the] Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs," Caulton-Harris wrote in a summary of the meeting. "The state Department of Public Health has no authority to overturn a decision made by another state agency. DPH can focus on mitigation of factors that might have an impact."

Now, Allen said, he and Fenton have turned their energy to trying to persuade Rick Sullivan, the newly sworn in secretary of the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (and former Westfield mayor), to reverse the decision made by his predecessor, Bowles, that the PRE plant does not require an environmental impact report.

"An EIR should be done," Allen said. "It should have been done at the beginning for scientific reasons. It certainly should be done now for credibility and scientific reasons. ... That's the state's responsibility."

Allen notes that he's yet to take a position for or against the proposed plant. "When it was a C and D wood project, I was dead set against it," he said. But when the developers changed the plant's fuel source to all green wood chips, "then we were kind of back to square one. It was a good move by the developers to avoid going into any further due diligence."

But it also means the city needs full, detailed information on the potential effects of the changes—something, Allen said, that would require an environmental impact report. "It's pathetic that we haven't done one," Allen said. "It just doesn't feel protective of the public good to me."

"Listen, the whole world is run on cost/benefit analysis," said Kroll, of the McKnight Neighborhood Council. "You do it as a consumer: what's something going to cost, and what do you get back?"

Our society needs efficient alternative energy sources, Kroll said. "But the question is always: at what cost?" In the case of the proposed PRE plant, he said, "the health detriments far outweigh any benefits."

News

Money and Power

By Maureen Turner

Thursday, January 27, 2011

A number of the players behind the controversial proposed Palmer Renewable Energy plant are also significant political contributors.

According to records from the Massachusetts Office of Campaign and Political Finance:

- Employees of Palmer Paving—all but a couple of them members of the Callahan family, which owns the company—have contributed tens of thousands of dollars to political campaigns over the past decade, on both the state and local levels. Palmer Paving owns the land on which the Palmer Renewable Energy plant is to be built, and David Callahan, president of Palmer Paving, is also the manager and resident agent of Palmer Renewable Energy, LLC.

Those contributions include a total of \$2,500 to Gov. Deval Patrick since December of 2009, and \$750 to Lt. Gov. Tim Murray since December of 2008. (Members of the Callahan family also gave a total of \$4,000 to Tim Cahill, Patrick's rival for the Democratic nomination for governor in 2010, and \$400 to Charlie Baker, the Republican gubernatorial candidate that year.)

On the municipal level, Callahan family members who work for Palmer Paving have given \$2,025 to Mayor Domenic Sarno since the fall of 2008. Michael Shea, listed as Palmer Paving's manager, gave \$500 to Sarno in November of 2009. Sarno has voiced his "conditional support" of the PRE plant, dependent on the project satisfying government safety requirements.

At-large City Councilor Jimmy Ferrera, Jr. received two \$250 contributions from David Callahan, one in October of 2008 and the other in June of 2009. In September of 2008, Ferrera voted in favor of PRE receiving a special permit for the plant.

Former Councilor Bud Williams, who left the Council at the end of 2009, received \$1,000 from Callahan family members from October, 2008 to June of 2009. Williams also received a \$500 donation from the president of Barletta Engineering of Canton, Palmer Paving's partner in the Springfield plant, in June of 2009. Williams voted in favor of the special permit.

City Councilor Jose Tosado received a \$250 donation from David Callahan in October of 2008. Tosado voted in favor of the special permit that year, but recently told the Advocate that he can no longer support the project in light of new information about its risks. Tosado is widely expected to announce that he's running for mayor this fall.

- Frank Fitzgerald, a Springfield attorney who represents Palmer Renewable Energy (as well as many other entities that have appeared before the City Council over the years), is also a major contributor to state and local candidates.

Since January of 2008, Fitzgerald's Springfield campaign contributions have included:

- \$1,050 to At-large City Councilor Jimmy Ferrera
- \$1,000 to Mayor Domenic Sarno
- \$700 to Council President Jose Tosado
- \$625 to former Councilor Bud Williams
- \$250 to At-large Councilor Kateri Walsh (Walsh voted in favor of PRE's special permit in 2008)
- \$250 to At-large Councilor Tim Rooke (Rooke also voted in favor of the special permit)