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Public has chance to react to BioAg project

For the past few weeks, residents have seen news reports about Belmont BioAg, the \$125 million project which would include a 50-million-gallon ethanol plant, 20,000-head cattle finishing lot, and waste digesters which would generate power all in one location. Tuesday evening gave citizens a chance to ask questions about the project and its possible impact on the community.

More than 300 people packed the stands in the Belmont High School gymnasium for the meeting, the second of two events held this week. Bob Brodbeck and Tim Baye from Lafayette BioAg, Russ Anderson from the Department of Natural Resources, Mike Ballantine from EarthTech, and Randy Woodrich each addressed the interested crowd, covering different aspects of the project, from how everything would work to how the permit process will go.

The heart of the evening was the question and answer portion of the meeting, where those in the audience submitted. The questions ranged from water usage to what would happen to animals that may die during the finishing process.

Water seemed to be a large concern with parts of the audience, since the project will use roughly one million gallons a day. Some in the crowd wondered whether the usage would deplete the water table. Brodbeck stated that the project uses half of the water that the City of Platteville uses, while Woodrich noted that the water table of the area is roughly six billion gallons.



Bob Brodbeck addresses the crowd assembled in Belmont Tuesday night.

Others wondered about dead animals. The average loss rate for American finishing lots is three percent, which would mean 1,200 to 1,800 dead cattle a year in Belmont. Tim Baye stated that the campus' combustor would handle the carcasses, and added that since the animals are in a fully enclosed building where waste will be removed quickly, he hoped to reduce the loss percentage more.

Shared during the presentation was that Lafayette BioAg had alternative sites that they were looking at, but were committed to making the Belmont site work. Some in the audience wondered why

they did not choose a site near the Mississippi River, or near a rail line. Baye told the group assembled that rail lines are not needed to haul in grain for the ethanol plant, or to move the cattle. He did add that trying to find a 280-acre site is difficult, and the Belmont location met needs as far as close proximity to the freeway system, as well as being a short distance from the river.

"And our investors live here," Baye said.

Because they were not able to get to all of the questions, Belmont BioAg plans to put responses to those questions on their website.

David Sue lives within

one-eighth of a mile of the proposed project, and he still had several questions at the end of the night. "It's a large, far reaching dream," Sue said, noting he was still not sure whether it was a realistic dream or not. Sue had questions about the amount of space each cow in the finishing barns will have, stated to be 25 sq. ft. While larger than the industry standard of 18.5 ft., Sue said that its still smaller than what a 4'x8' sheet of plywood take up, which is 32 sq. ft.

"Just visualize that, its going to be small," Sue said.

"They did a good job with this meeting," Sue said, but "I was not satisfied yet." Sue

also had questions about how antibiotics given to the cattle would affect the digester.

Sue did add that he plans to go any other meeting they have on the project so he can find out more information. "That's what meetings like this are for."

Another person who wished not to be identified said he felt the project will be a positive thing, especially since he found out it will not part of any Department of Development program.

Local businessman Steve Craven was in the audience for the entire meeting. "Its a very interesting idea," Craven said afterwards, who noted he still wanted to learn more about the project. A long-time member of the school board, Craven said that what the project may bring to the community is not innovation, but population. "The greatest impact would be people."

Shullsburg farmer Ted Wiegel said he was all for the project. "They answered my questions."

The night before, a similar presentation was made to community leaders and businessmen at UW-Platteville.

"Being a farmer, I know I was concerned," Sauer said of when he initially learned of the project, and said that as he learned about the details, he felt confident about the project.

"Bring it on," said Mike Byrne, who felt the project would bring Wisconsin agriculture into the 21st Century.

Belmont Village President Ken Leahy said that when the final plans of Belmont BioAg

were first introduced to him in September, his first concern was the odor a complex this size would produce. "At first, I was skeptical," Leahy said. He said he has had a number of questions answered about that subject, but still has more, especially concerning the truck traffic that will pass through the village. According to Department of Transportation numbers used by Belmont BioAg, Belmont averaged 200 trucks an hour when U.S. 151 was still a two-lane road. Leahy is skeptical about that number, and hopes to find out more in the days and weeks to come. Leahy said he feels that while the project may not have a direct impact on the village, its success could have a ripple effect, one that spurs home construction, as well as improved business for local shops.

Leahy said that he expected Belmont High School to be packed for the public informational meeting the following night. "The whole tri-state area wants to know about this."

County Land Conservationist Lisa Trumble said that she has not seen an effort to address concerns about the environmental impact of a project like she has with Belmont BioAg. "I was very pleasantly surprised," Trumble said of the effort.

Trumble had been chosen, along with 18 others to serve on the citizens advisory board for the project, a group that also included former DNR Secretary George Meyer. The group met nine times over the course of seven weeks, reviewing each aspect of the project. "We fired questions at them every night," Trumble

said of the advisory panel, and she said that the engineers and designers came back with answers. Trumble added that for those times when they didn't have the answers, they said so and worked diligently to get them.

"They took us seriously," Trumble noted. "Everything was important to them. I'm impressed."

Lancaster Mayor Jerry Wehrle said he was impressed with the presentation, as well as the openness of the project. "I have never seen a better start."

One of the people that has been working on the project from the beginning is former representative Joe Tregoning, who began working on the project as part of the state Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection. Tregoning said that he hopes a project like this will serve as a model to agriculture operations throughout the United States, especially when it comes to finishing lots. "You've got to be able to do something with the waste besides spread it on the ground."

Tregoning also said that while other companies use parts of the systems destined to be at Belmont BioAg, none incorporate all of the systems that will be used in Lafayette County.