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Vinland residents fight PCB burial

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VINLAND -- More than 200 town residents filled the fire station Thursday night, and voted unanimously to fight against the burial of Fox River sediments PCBs in their back yard.

Instead, the residents want the PCBs destroyed, using glass furnace technology developed by the Minergy Corporation in Neenah. Residents voted to take their fight to the Winnebago County Board Tuesday.

"There shouldn't be any question about it," said Margaret Potratz, who is already dealing with arsenic in her groundwater. "It should be done properly. I don't want to worry about something else contaminating our well."

The vote came after two hours of expert presentations, questions and answers. But the answer to the big question -- can residents prevent a paper company landfill in their midst from accepting the PCBs? --remained elusive.

Chuck Koehler, the town's attorney, explained that the town's authority under the state's landfill siting law was limited to negotiating such issues as hours of operation, screening, dirt control and fees.

"The Town of Vinland, just like any other town, can't just say no," Koehler said.

But can they stop it, the people asked.

Town supervisors said they would fight the plan, but said they needed the support of residents.

"If you sit back and do nothing, the probability is greater that it (a **PCB** landfill) will be here," Koehler told the crowd. "The town's powers are limited. Your power, through your representatives, is unlimited."

PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, are manmade chemicals once used in the manufacture of carbonless paper until the federal government banned their use in 1976. PCBs, a suspected carcinogen, have been linked to birth defects in animals and to developmental problems in the children of woman who consumed **PCB**-contaminated fish.

At issue is the recently announced settlement on the cleanup of 784,000 cubic yards of **PCB**-contaminated sediments from Little Lake Butte des Morts. Two paper companies, Glatfelter and WTM I, have signed a consent order with state and federal governments, agreeing to fund and manage the \$60 million cleanup (with \$10 million from other paper companies) and Georgia-Pacific Corp. has offered the use of its landfill in Vinland.

State and federal governments have signed off on the deal, but before PCBs can be buried in Vinland, Georgia-Pacific must negotiate a local landfill agreement with the town. The state Department of Natural Resources also must approve the landfill design.

Town officials oppose the plan and have lobbied Gov. Jim Doyle and other state officials to instead use technology developed by Minergy that would destroy the PCBs and transform the sediments into an environmentally safe glass aggregate that can be used in road construction.

J.W. Spear, an environmental engineer hired by the town, said DNR-approved landfills are well designed. Any leakage for the first few decades would be minimal, he said.

Whether such a landfill can be managed for centuries remains unknown, however.

"It's never been tested," Spear said of long-term landfill disposal of PCBs. "Why would we do that to our grandchildren?"

The DNR has said the Minergy technology shows promise for the larger quantities of PCBs downstream, at De Pere and Green Bay. But the new technology is not cost-effective for the smaller quantities and shorter cleanup time envisioned for Little Lake Butte des Morts, a 6-mile widening of the Fox River that begins at the Neenah and Menasha dams.

Terry Carroll, an engineer and regional manager for Minergy, a subsidiary of We Energies, said studies by his company estimate the **PCB**-laced sediments in the lake can be dredged and treated in an industrial-size glass furnace for between \$80 million and \$100 million.

It could be less, he said. No one can say without additional cost studies based on engineering designs.

But destroying the PCBs and recycling the sediments would be good public policy, he said.

"If it costs a little more, we think it is worth it," Carroll said.

So do the townspeople. They approved a resolution to that effect going before the County Board next Tuesday.

Town officials have already lined up support from county supervisors and legislators, including state Sen. Mike Ellis, R-Neenah.

Town Chairman Raymond Batley read a letter to Doyle, pointing out that more than 16,000 tons of the sediment will contain PCBs in great enough concentrations to be considered toxic under federal law. The state seems to be basing its choice of landfill technology on cost, the letter states.

Town residents pledged to back up their town officials with a letter-writing campaign.

Jennifer Feyerherm, a toxics specialist with the Sierra Club, said the environmental organization is supportive of glass furnace technology if it can be proven safe.

"What the Town of Vinland is recognizing is that these things don't go away," she said