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Officials weigh in on Bion proposal

By AARON CURTIS
acurtis@palltimes.com

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While Thursday's public meeting with Bion officials grew hostile at times, with one attendee telling representatives to "pack their bags," that sentiment is not necessarily felt by the rest of Oswego County when it comes to the construction of a beef finishing and ethanol production facility within the area.

Oswego County Legislator Amy Tresidder, D-Oswego, said that citizens and officials within the county need to be open to the process before making snap judgments.

According to members of Bion Environmental Technologies Inc., the 72,000-head cattle endeavor within Oswego County borders would include a focus on cattle finishing, for distribution in eastern sections of the United States and portions of southeastern Canada. The cattle could be placed in multiple locations to suit space specifications.

The plant would also have the capacity to produce several thousand gallons of ethanol each year.

Officials assert that the project would be a closed-loop process, with manure being used to produce energy at the facility, and wet distiller grain from an ethanol plant would be fed to the cattle.

A poll question posted on The Palladium-Times' website in October indicated that 111 of 197 voters were open to the possibility of the development of a cattle finishing and ethanol facility within county borders.

"From my standpoint, I'm not going to say 'no' to anything before I know the details," said Legislator Jake Mulcahey, D-Oswego. "Oswego County needs jobs."

During Thursday's meeting held on the SUNY Oswego campus, Bion Environmental Technologies Inc. officials claimed that the production of the 72,000-head cattle facility could result in 588 jobs, totaling approximately \$20.3 million in annual wages. Of those 588 jobs, 400 would include beef slaughter and other processing positions, accounting for roughly \$12 million worth of wages — or nearly \$30,000 in annual wages for each employee.

Mulcahey noted that discussions with officials at the Oswego County Department of Social Services suggest that the poor economy is resulting in increased workloads for staff.

"They are understaffed and overworked," Mulcahey said. "It's getting worse and worse as the economy gets worse and worse. Create some jobs and get people back to work. We have to take a real hard long look at things before we say 'no,'" he added. "We can't get scared and run away."

Tresidder noted that she has been following Bion closely for about a year. "There is always risk involved, but we can't just shut things down immediately," she said. "We have to keep open minds."

However, the minds of other legislators within Oswego County have been made up.

"This is business as usual," said Chairman of the Legislature Barry Leemann, R-Amboy, who, like

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Mulcahey and Tressider, attended Thursday's presentation by Bion representatives.

He expressed his disapproval of the project, noting that he was surprised that Bion would not be running the potential facility or multiple facilities themselves, but would bring in other companies or farmers to carry out the technology they developed.

This was a fact brought to light during Thursday's meeting toward the end of a question-and-answer period.

"They should have established that off the bat," Leemann said. "It would have helped them, not hurt them."

Legislator Ronald Sakonyi, R-Constantia, also noted he considered the Bion endeavor ill-advised for the county, adding that he did attend Thursday's meeting with an open mind.

"I wanted to see what they had to say," he said, noting that he worked on a dairy farm for 10 years and discussed his concerns with disease coming into the county due to the potential presence of such a substantial amount of cattle.

"On the farm we would see what diseases could result from this situation, especially with that many cattle," Sakonyi said. He added that, for that reason, he liked the idea of Bion establishing bonds to cover other farms in the county if a disease were to spread. However, Dominic Bassani, vice president of strategic planning for Bion, said that no bonding would be pursued.

"There is a lot of risk there," Sakonyi said. "With these diseases it could be catastrophic for the county."

For more information on Bion Environmental Technologies Inc., visit www.biontech.com.

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