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Didion proposes another ethanol plant

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By Craig Spychalla

CAMBRIA — Last time, it divided a small community with farmers on one side and the village on the other.

This time the village might not have a say.

Although Dale Drachenberg, vice president of operations at Didion Milling, said last week he knew of no plans for an ethanol plant, the company said Tuesday it is going ahead with an attempt to propose a 40-million-gallon plant in the town of Courtland.

Plans for a second ethanol plant in Columbia County call for one to be built adjacent to Didion Milling on the other side of Cabbage Road, just south of Cambria and just over the village line.

In 2002, Didion proposed a similar plant in Cambria and a group of citizens formed Cambrians For Thoughtful Development to oppose the facility. The group voiced concerns over heavier truck traffic, environmental issues and the proximity of the site to a school.

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Gary Nehring, Village Board chairman in Cambria, whose vote helped deny a zoning permit to Didion, said he isn't sure if Cambria will have a say this time around.

"There's some serious wetland issues and high-capacity well issues," he said. "I assume they've got their ducks in a row."

George Michelson, water supply engineer for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, said last year that Didion was denied a permit in 2002 for the amount of water it requested for an ethanol plant. The United Wisconsin Grain Producers plant down the road in Friesland, for example, uses 442,080 gallons per day.

"We have six high-capacity wells within a quarter mile of their future plans,"

Nehring said of the village, Del Monte and Seneca Foods all having two wells.

But Didion seems confident of its proposal.

"We are doing the informational meetings. And we have a book together that will hopefully answer everyone's questions," said Dow Didion, president of Didion Milling.

He said with the facility in Friesland, people have an idea of what to expect from an ethanol plant.

"We've always been looking at ethanol. It's here for the future," he said.

Unlike the UWGP ethanol plant, a Didion ethanol facility would be able to accept corn from any farmer in the region, regardless of whether they have a storage facility on their property, Didion said.

"With gas prices at \$3 a gallon and us at war, people are looking for alternatives to buying oil from terrorists," he said.

Glenn Smits, Courtland board chairman, said the town isn't against the plant as far as he knows.

"When it comes to ethanol there's always people for and against it. It's always controversial," he said.

Didion is preparing to submit applications to the town of Courtland and Columbia County for rezoning and a conditional use permit for the site, which is owned by Grand River Distribution, a subsidiary of Didion Milling.

Drachenberg, in a press release, said he is hopeful Columbia County will approve the permit so the plant could be operational in 2007.

While Cambria waits to see if it will have a voice in the new proposal, Nehring said the village also has had concerns with Didion's milling plant. "They haven't been a very good neighbor," he said, adding that he believes the town of Courtland will be pulling for the new plant because it is made up of mostly farmers.

"We have an ethanol plant three miles from town. I don't know why the state would let two ethanol plants three miles from each other," he said.

A public information meeting on the Didion proposal will be held May 23 at the Bierstube Restaurant, 207 W. Cook St., Portage, from 3 to 8 p.m. Informational

binders also will be available starting May 2 in all nine Columbia County public libraries.

"We've tried to anticipate people's concerns and will address them up front. I believe those who examine our proposal will be impressed with the value it brings to the community," Drachenberg said.

[cspychalla@madison.com](mailto:cspychalla@madison.com)

745-3516

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