

The official mind seems to be made up, but shouldn't our elected officials care about the opinions of people who live near proposed ethanol plants?

The ethanol experts

By Sarah Lloyd

On April 1, the people of the Village of Cambria went to the polls and voted on an advisory referendum asking if Didion Milling, Inc. should be allowed to build an ethanol plant "in or near" the Village of Cambria. With near record turnout, 60 percent said "No."

This happened in spite of lobbying from Democratic Governor Jim Doyle, Republican Assembly Representative Gene Hahn and Wisconsin's agribusiness interests. Ethanol's boosters present very little evidence in support of their product beyond phantom economic arguments and a sense of "What's the big deal?"

Didion wants to add an ethanol plant to their existing mill. Two weeks before the referendum, in a Country Today article that mentioned the Didion proposal and the controversy surrounding it, Governor Jim Doyle said he did not understand why many communities are so concerned about ethanol plants.

What doesn't the governor understand, I wonder? Does he not understand that putting an ethanol plant next to a school is not such a good idea? Does he not understand why people in a village with a population of only 790 might not want another 112 trucks a day rolling through town, emitting diesel fumes and making the streets dangerous for children? Is it really such a strange notion that residents of Cambria are not excited about the \$8,000 increase to the tax base that will come with Didion's ethanol expansion? That's only about \$26 annually per household.

Many of us living in and around Cambria have made ourselves ethanol experts just in the time since Didion's plans for expansion were announced. While ethanol does reduce some tailpipe emissions, it increases others and contributes to ground-level ozone and smog.

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Ethanol plants pose serious environmental risks, emitting such pollutants as volatile organic compounds and particulate matter, in addition to a particularly strong and unpleasant odor. Given the vast amount of water, natural gas and other resources it takes to produce ethanol, the fuel is a net energy loser. Growing the corn from which ethanol is produced also requires vast resources and usually entails the use of heavy amounts of fertilizer and an increase in the amount of genetically modified corn.

I would like to invite Governor Doyle to come to Cambria to talk to the people if he truly does not understand. In fact, I would invite politicians and policymakers from the federal, state, county, village and town levels to talk to the experts before they continue with their mad rush to promote ethanol production with subsidies, budget allocations and rhetoric. When I say "experts," I mean the people in the communities where these plants are located, the people who have to live with this policy of ethanol promotion.

Rep. Hahn, from Cambria, does not feign Doyle's ignorance. Rather, he pretends to relay some expertise of his own in support of the ethanol operation. Hahn put out a news release four days before the referendum titled "Ethanol: Russell, Kansas Breathes the Sweet Smell of Success."

Raving about the economic gains Russell enjoys from the ethanol plant, Hahn resorts to a series of fawning quotes in lieu of any real data: "The odor from the plant is described as pleasant, toasty bread, and yeasty... The plant employs 36 people. Another 120 jobs will be created as personal income is spent and re-spent in the local economy... Ethanol processing is one of the cleanest, greenest industries out there and we need to take advantage of it."

I decided to see if I could talk to some local experts in Russell. I went on the Web, waded through some hotel sites and found a phone number for a restaurant next to one of the hotels. I dialed the number and a young man answered.

"Hello, I live in Cambria, Wisconsin," I told him. "They want to build an ethanol plant here. I understand that Russell, Kansas, has an ethanol plant. What is it like?"

“Crappy,” he said. “It stinks all over town. And they promised a bunch of jobs and I don’t think we really got them. The people that were hired were mostly from out of town.”

“They want to build an ethanol plant here next to the school,” I told him.

“Don’t let them do that,” replied the man from Russell, Kansas.

I’m glad that I had a chance to get this viewpoint from an expert on the ground in Russell.

Last month Doyle presented a \$1.3 million check to the Ace Ethanol plant in Stanley as part of the state’s Ethanol Incentive program. Governor Scott McCallum’s last budget included \$3 million to promote ethanol. Doyle’s proposed budget has reduced the ethanol incentive money but not eliminated it.

In this time of budget crises, is this the best use of taxpayer money? I don’t think so, but let’s ask the experts in Stanley and Monroe, and Russell, Kansas, and Lena, Illinois. Are family farms benefiting from the promotion of corn-based ethanol production? Are the people benefiting in the towns, villages, and cities that host these plants? I would really like to know. Let’s call the experts.

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