

PORTAGE DAILY REGISTER



Columbia County's Daily Newspaper

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Ethanol plant plan on slow track

By Paul Ferguson

Portage - A zoning petition for an ethanol plant on the outskirts of Cambria stalled out before the Columbia County Board Wednesday night.

Although it amounts to a delay and a victory of sorts for plant opponents, the delay was perhaps a fitting resolution for the evening. The contentious site for Didion Milling's proposed plant generated more than an hour of debate between supporters and opponents alike, all part of a rare large crowd for a County Board meeting.

When it came to the supervisors' chance to vote, a 17-12 majority voted to keep the rezoning moving. But that margin wasn't enough to overcome board rules on ordinance changes, which rezoning petitions are.

Ordinance changes, because they change the county's laws and ideally are to be considered thoroughly before passage, can only move to second and third considerations by a two-thirds vote.

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ordinance change can pass by a majority vote.

Relatively uncontroversial zoning petitions regularly pass with the board waving its rules and changing zoning designations every meeting.

But the Didion proposal is anything but uncontroversial. Knowing that debate could easily steer off topic, County Board Chairman Harlan Baumgartner ordered that speakers address only the merits of a rezoning petition, namely whether adjacent industrial uses and nearby transportation and utilities match the proposed industrial use.

The limits didn't work well as the night progressed and issues such as economic development and the United States' reliance on foreign oil popped up.

Still, the appropriateness of the ethanol plant site on Cabbage Road was a big enough topic.

Portage attorney John Miller, who represents Didion Milling, said the site made sense.

"First of all, for obvious reasons, it's adjacent to an existing industry site. It's adjacent to 60 acres of land in the village of Cambria, which are already zoned industrial," Miller said.

The utility and transportation access offered by the existing industrial site makes it a sound placement, Miller added. "It's our position that it makes sense to have your industries close together where you can utilize those efficiencies," he said.

But former Cambria trustee Jim Ebert said the water use in the village is already burdened to a degree that adding a major water user such as an ethanol plant is completely illogical.

When that threshold isn't met, second and third readings proceed one per meeting at subsequent meetings, and after a third reading an

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"That aquifer is overburdened," Ebert said. "It's an overburdened industrial district already. There's too much industry in such a small place."

Supervisor Donald Nelson gave the most impassioned remarks of any board member, saying the village of Cambria, after the expiration of legislation protecting it from a plant proposed in 2002, was now getting railroaded by the town of Courtland and farming interests, and that many speakers Wednesday night were making broad appeals with promises of economic incentives rather than dealing with the fallout from an ethanol plant.

"Who can be against the jobs and economic development anymore than you can be against apple pie, motherhood and waving the flag on the Fourth of July? They turn it into that and they forgot the people that are going to be libeled and the people who have to live beside it and the people who have to run their community and provide services for this new industrial site," Nelson said.

"Cambria is at the mercy of this board, and that shouldn't be."

Town of Courtland Chairman Glenn Smits denied that the town wasn't concerned about nearby residents, noting that the town government went on record as sharing those concerns. He ultimately called for the rezoning.

As such, the rezoning will have a second reading at the board's July meeting, with a third reading to come either then or perhaps as late as the board's subsequent meeting in September.

Vote on meal program funding postponed

The Columbia County Board of Supervisors delayed a vote on a resolution that, if passed, would have given \$22,000 to the county's financially strapped Elderly Nutrition Program.

Officials began a waiting list earlier this year due to insufficient program funds coupled with extraordinary growth in its number of clients. The program, which distributes discounted lunches by either home delivery or at nine meal sites, was on track to serve a record number of meals, as noted in a resolution that the County Board was to take up Wednesday.

After beginning the waiting list and polling program clients, officials decided to seek money from the county's general fund to cover a projected deficit for 2006 rather than proceed with other options such as deep cuts to the program.

The county Finance Committee, however, was unable to review the funding request prior to the full board meeting Wednesday. The matter is postponed until the July 19 meeting.

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