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Ethanol agreement on the table

By Jen McCoy

CAMBRIA -- It was a case of deal or no deal Monday night as Didion Milling outlined an agreement with the village for a new ethanol plant, but no answer appears to be in sight.

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During the holiday weekend, 30 diligent residents attended a Cambria Village Board meeting to vocalize concerns and compliments about the Didion proposal, but the timing of the document caused concern for some.

"The village office was closed on Friday, and that was when the proposal was done. There was no meaning behind it (the timing)," said Dow Didion, president of Didion Milling.

The two-page document outlined the desire for the developer to gain rezoning approval and conditional use permits for the purpose of expanding its existing facility by adding an ethanol plant on Cabbage Road in the nearby Town of Courtland. If the rezoning and permits are obtained, the document said, then the developer would agree to a number of promises to the village.

Poll

More than half of the people surveyed in a new poll said they think ethics standards in state government have declined in the last 10 years. Do you agree?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

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Among the agreement: Didion would repair or replace village wells if affected by low water levels; noise at the plant would be maintained at 85 decibels; Didion would reimburse the village for any portion of tax reduction and the company may purchase village services, such as a back-up water supply.

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The Village Board tabled the document and it will be put up for discussion at a later date, said Vytas Salna, village attorney.

Didion sat down with supporters of the plant and listened to residents who do not believe the corporation's promises.

Many residents who spoke against the plant said that miscommunication between opposing sides has blurred their main point; they were not against ethanol, they were against the location of the plant. One resident said that the location was too close to the school and dangerous because of traffic.

"Sixty percent of residents voted no on the referendum (to have an ethanol plant) and there were two reasons we heard them say no; the location, and because Didion can not be trusted. I say no deal," said Bonnie Smith, Cambria resident.

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Among concerns of a plant in the area were traffic increase from semi trucks, water levels and purity of water, noise from the plant and the smell of the production.

"Yes, we want to help farmers, but you can't keep taking this much water out of here and survive," said John Doucette, Cambria resident.

A letter from a Didion employee, in support of the plant, was read at the meeting by a trustee. The letter said that they did not want to rely on "Arab oil," that Wisconsin "sits on a swamp and it doesn't look like we will ever deplete the water resource," and that those who do not support farmers should relocate.

Resident Stewart West said there are many other sides to those arguments. He said that he voted no on the referendum because of the location of the plant. He questions whether Cambria could sustain two full canneries and a plant on the edge of town.

Cambrian resident, Nick McConochie, said that he was in support of the plant because the village is slowly dimming.

"The LP tank at DeMonte is more of a hazard to us than the ethanol plant. I couldn't believe the village would pass up tax money. The village is shriveling. Eventually we're going to be busing our kids to other towns. Seniors with property taxes are going up and up," McConochie said.

Neighbors of the Didion operation since 1999, Tom and Mary Jansma, of Courtland, said there are questionable tactics used by the plant and its supporters.

"They have not been a good neighbor -- period. They have never done things by the rules, and if they can cut corners they will. If corners are cut, it is for the almighty dollar," said Jansma. She said that wildlife that used to be abundant in the area no longer lives there.

Strong supporter of ethanol and feed farmer, Randy Link, said that he did not fully believe data represented by John Mueller, the founder of Cambrians for Thoughtful Development. Mueller asked not to be addressed as a liar.

Tension in the meeting rose as residents spoke for or against the plant because the proposal surrounds either their hometown, their careers, or both. The trustees on the board remained calm, and joked sometimes to clear the air.

"I'm just happy they tabled it. It's all we could hope for tonight," Mueller said.

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