

PORTAGE DAILY REGISTER



Columbia County's Daily Newspaper

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County approves ethanol plant rezoning

By Paul Ferguson

Didion Milling's ethanol plant on the border of Cambria got past one hurdle Wednesday night as the Columbia County Board rezoned 10 acres of land for a plant proposed to manufacture 40 million gallons of ethanol a year.

For the second month in a row, supporters and opponents alike packed the board meeting room, with rezoning supporters wearing custom-made baseball caps and pins that read "Ethanol Yes!" To some degree, this time the County Board agreed, passing the measure on a final 26-3 vote.

In June, the rezoning made it past just a single reading. As an ordinance change, rezoning petitions require three readings and three affirmative votes before the board, but supervisors routinely vote to have second and third readings in one meeting rather than visit an issue at three separate meetings. The Didion petition received a majority of supervisors' votes in June, but it didn't pass the two-thirds threshold to suspend the board rules on ordinance changes.

It did Wednesday, despite nearly an hour of debate on the rezoning. Cambria resident Dallas Buchholz asked the board to question the wisdom of the Cabbage Road site in the town of Courtland, since it is less than one-half mile from both the Cambria-Friesland School District and residential development. The proximity to such properties and the comparatively small 10-acre parcel both go against industry placement standards, Buchholz said.

"I've stated before and often that the majority of opponents in Cambria have no problem with an ethanol plant located one mile away from the village. Would this be so difficult to accomplish?" he asked.

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Supervisor Sarah Lloyd, whose district includes the area in question, urged a delayed vote or an outright rejection based on a 2003 decision from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources denying permits for two Didion high-capacity

wells that had a pumping capacity of 500 gallons per minute.

"I called the DNR yesterday and Didion has applied for two 500 gallon-per-minute wells. So in 2003 the DNR said they could not have two high-capacity wells because according to the state high-capacity-well law, you cannot draw down a municipal

well more than 10 feet. According to the DNR..., the Cambria well would be drawn down more than 10 feet," Lloyd said.

"It may be kind of a waste of everyone's time if the DNR does not approve the necessary permits for having Didion have an ethanol plant."

But Susan Friers, a Didion-hired hydrogeologist out of Waukesha, said her studies showed no issue with the Cambria aquifer because Didion only needs 300 gallons per minute. The aquifer is 600 feet thick or more, and it has the ability to sufficiently meet the village's and the plant's needs

when the aquifer's recharge rate is considered.

"Imagine a bathtub with water trickling in from a spout and there are a couple straws pulling water out," Friers said. "The amount coming in from groundwater coming in ... is much larger than the amount being removed."

Dow Didion, president of Didion Milling, also asserted an agreement proposed to the village of Cambria contains provisions to alleviate concerns about issues such as noise, equitable property assessments and water use.

"We have a guarantee in this agreement that if the village has an issue with their well, Didion Milling will pay for the repairs or the replacement of those wells. We made that same guarantee to our neighbors in Courtland township," Didion said.

With rezoning approved by the county and town of Courtland, the county's next step is issuing Didion a conditional use permit, which will prescribe certain conditions on things such as water use.

Didion hopes to open the plant in 2007.

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