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Last call for ethanol? St. Paul plant still under fire
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Subsidies have been pulled. Bills have been introduced to halt future state aid. And a spring trial is scheduled to determine whether St. Paul's Gopher State Ethanol plant lives or dies.

From distinct vantage points, Rose Gunness and Ethan Trepp shake their heads in frustration. They are two of the people at the vortex of a complex dispute about renewable energy, jobs, public health and the quality of life on the West End -- one of St. Paul's oldest neighborhoods.

Gunness, 69, a meatpacker's widow and mother of five, has lived in a bungalow two blocks north of the old Schmidt Brewery since the 1950s. She and three of her kids and some of her grandchildren have developed severe breathing problems they say were exacerbated when Minnesota Brewing started producing ethanol three years ago.

"At first it smelled like they were making some kind of new beer, but then the smell grew so yeasty, you couldn't breathe and it made you feel like vomiting," she said.

Trepp, 24, is one of about two dozen workers at the plant. He wonders if he'll still have a job in August, when he's set to get married.

As an operator and member of the machinists union, Trepp mans the control room and makes sure the plant keeps running. He received a degree in chemical engineering at the University of Minnesota because he wanted to forge a career in the field of renewable energy.

"Ethanol is a terrific idea to use our extra corn and help satisfy our demand for fuel in the Midwest instead of the Middle East," said Trepp, who lives in south Minneapolis.

"Fuel security is a huge deal, so huge we're sending thousands of troops to the Middle East," he said. "If the neighbors succeed in shutting this plant down, the demand for fuel to power everyone's SUVs isn't going to go away. We'll just ship in

ethanol from South Dakota and Wisconsin, which seems like a silly way to support the local economy."

'Feeling the heat'

On a recent night in a church basement near the plant, more than 125 neighbors sat on folding chairs as attorney Michael Unger led them through a PowerPoint computer slide-show presentation on attempts to close the plant at various governmental levels.

"I wish I could tell you the end was coming quickly, but I think that would be an exaggeration," Unger said. "The plant is feeling the heat, but we've got to keep the pressure on."

Unger works at the large Minneapolis law firm of Rider, Bennett, Egan & Arundel, which has allowed him to represent the neighborhood on a volunteer basis for two years now.

Originally, the ethanol plant won approval from local politicians because it was billed as an innovative way to save the century-old brewery and 200 beer-making jobs.

Now, those politicians admit they feel like fools for giving the go-ahead to North America's first urban ethanol plant -- a source of health, odor and noise complaints since it opened in April 2000. When the brewery went belly-up last summer, the political will behind the plant died with it.

"We thought we were saving a community asset, but now we don't have the brewery, so the complexity of the issue has changed," state Rep. Carlos Mariani, DFL-St. Paul, told the crowd in the church basement. "It was never our intent to have a refinery in your back yard. We took a wrong turn and now we're trying to correct our mistake."

St. Paul legislators are pushing a bill that would cut any state aid to ethanol plants in so-called cities of the first class -- Minneapolis, St. Paul and Duluth. Gopher State Ethanol would be the only plant affected.

Organized labor and corn farmers, plus diminishing clout for St. Paul's all-DFL delegation at the heavily Republican State Capitol, could hurt that bill's chances. Other legislation would earmark state funds to relocate the plant to a rural area, but the state's budget shortfall could make those funds unattainable.

Unger and Mariani urged the neighbors to call, visit or write key Republican

legislators. Don't engage them in a debate on the merits of ethanol, they warned, just tell them about how this plant has affected your lives.

"Keep the focus on this facility and how it's an incompatible match for you, your homes, your schools and your churches," Mariani said.

Unger asked neighbors to start keeping odor diaries to use as evidence when the trial starts May 12 on the city's request for an injunction to close the plant as a smelly, noisy and health-hindering nuisance.

Family's troubles

At Gunness' home near the corner of Webster and Grace Sts., family members detail health issues they say have received short shrift compared with odor and noise emanating from the plant.

Rose's daughter Jean Gunness, 46, recalled nightly walks she used to take over the nearby High Bridge with a friend. When the ethanol production began, Jean Gunness said, she started coughing and experiencing shortness of breath a few blocks into her walks. She has been diagnosed with a form of emphysema that usually stays dormant until a person nears 50 years of age and then progresses far more slowly than her case has. She said she's on a list for a lung transplant.

"I have no qualms about it; I know the plant accelerated my condition," said Jean Gunness, who moved to South St. Paul in 2001 on doctor's orders to get away from the plant's emissions.

"My doctor said I'd be dead in a year if I didn't move," she said. "After 30 minutes visiting my mother, I'm wheezing and coughing."

Her sister, Christine Hannan, lives in a small house next to her mother. She's put her house up for sale. Eleven people have walked through, but none has made an offer.

"When the wind is blowing from the south, I can't open the windows," said Hannan, 50, who also has breathing problems. "My mother and I went to Arizona for a vacation and I felt fine. When I came home, the problems came right back."

Jeff Gunness, their 29-year-old brother, said that whenever family members have testified at public hearings, Gopher State officials have been quick to point out that his sisters and mother were smokers.

"I've never smoked in my life and was playing on a rugby team in Florida, but since

I moved back home to my mom's house, I've been diagnosed with emphysema and I have about one-third of the lung capacity average people have," Jeff Guinness said. "This place is horrible."

Middle ground?

Trepp, the plant operator, has heard the complaints. He acknowledges that he's young and that he has only worked at Gopher State for less than a year.

"I think it's terrific to see people working for the benefit of their neighborhood," he said. "But what frustrates me is their only goal is to shut us down."

He points out that odor complaints don't stop when the plant shuts down for maintenance reasons and no emissions are being sent out to the neighborhood. He wonders why none of his co-workers complain of health issues when they work 12-hour shifts day in and day out. Nearby restaurants have refused to deliver food to the workers because the plant is so unpopular.

"It's become a mass hysteria kind of thing," Trepp said. "Obviously, the plant has created some difficulties being located in an urban area. But it's not an oil refinery. It's a small plant, and all that these people want to do is shut us down -- period."

Trepp said he wishes neighbors would seek some middle ground. Set some emission standards and let the plant try to meet them. The solution, he said, may lie in finding new pollution control equipment.

"We should try to figure out a way to make this work in an urban environment and take advantage of St. Paul's position to be a national leader," Trepp said. "When the only goal is to shut us down, that just doesn't seem progressive to me."

Unger, the lawyer working for the neighborhood, said Trepp's idealistic views are honorable, but coming a little late.

"His problem is he's come to the plant at the tail end of several years of this dispute," Unger said. "The neighborhood's militant position came about only after years of trying to work proactively with the plant. Now, people are tired of seeing profit motives interfering with their right to live in their homes without the smell and noise of an ethanol plant in their back yard."

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