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TMI asks to move emergency center

Plant owner says it will improve safety; critic ridicules proposal

Friday, June 8

By P. J. Reilly
Intelligencer Journal Staff

TMI: Move center

The owners of the Three Mile Island nuclear plant want to move the plant's emergency operations center more than 50 miles away to Chester County.

Exelon Nuclear Corp. claims the move would consolidate the company's emergency management programs for its three nuclear plants _ TMI, Peach Bottom and Limerick _ under one roof.

And that would improve the company's emergency response capabilities, said Exelon spokesman Ralph DeSantis.

"We are in the process of making improvements and enhancements to our safety plan," DeSantis said. "By moving TMI's off-site emergency operations center to Coatesville, it allows additional resources to be applied to TMI."

TMI's emergency operations center is now in an industrial park in Susquehanna Township, Dauphin County.

Emergency operations centers are located at least 10 miles away from a plant and serve as headquarters for decision-makers in the event of an accident.

They were established at the urging of a presidential commission that investigated the TMI accident in March 1979, the nation's worst commercial nuclear accident.

Eric Epstein, president of the nuclear watchdog group TMI Alert, called Exelon's plans a "slap in the face" to residents living near TMI.

"It makes no sense whatsoever to move your (emergency operation facility) to another area code," he said. "I haven't talked to anyone who is in favor of this."

The Coatesville center, which DeSantis described as a "state-of-the-art facility," has handled emergency operations for the Peach Bottom and Limerick plants since 1991.



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The Peach Bottom plant is in southern York County. The Limerick plant is in Montgomery County.

Both had been operated by PECO Energy. TMI was operated by GPU Energy until PECO bought the plant in 1999.

PECO has since merged with other utility firms, and they collectively operate under the Exelon name.

Exelon made its plans public late last month when it unveiled them to the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC).

The company is seeking NRC approval for three operations changes. They are:

Relocating the TMI emergency operations center.

Developing a standardized emergency plan for the three area nuclear plants.

Moving TMI's on-site technical support center from one building on the island to another.

Neil A. Sheehan, a NRC spokesman, called the changes "significant" and said the commission would review Exelon's plans closely before reaching a decision.

According to DeSantis, the TMI emergency operations center is only marginally staffed, unless there is an emergency at the plant.

If there is an emergency, company officials would man the center, he said. Since Exelon's regional headquarters, where most of those officials work, is in Kennett Square, DeSantis said the Coatesville office would be closer than the Susquehanna Township office.

"The emergency operations center is a support center where we provide technical support to the workers at the plant, and where we communicate with federal and state regulators," he said. "The primary response site in an emergency is at the plant, and that won't change."

Epstein said increasing the distance between the plant and the emergency center would spell disaster.

"That's like the state saying there should be one warden for all the state prisons working out of a central location," he said. "What good is he if there's a riot at one of the prisons?"

In addition to the request to relocate the emergency center, DeSantis said many positions assigned during emergency situations would be eliminated.

"That's a result of us streamlining processes and relying on automation for other tasks," he said.

In all, Exelon wants to eliminate 23 of the 53 emergency planning positions for its TMI, Peach Bottom and Limerick generating stations.

John Hanger, a former Pennsylvania utility regulator who now heads an environmental and consumer advocacy group, said Exelon should face a heavy burden to prove the consolidation will not reduce safety.

"The investments in safety shouldn't be cut, especially this significantly, without the highest levels of proof that there is no impact."

Epstein said the relocation "is never going to happen. I think they underestimated public sentiment on this." The Associated Press contributed to this story.

The week in review

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Wednesday, May 16, 2001

The pajel

Exelon Wants Change

By Shirley Ely
 Press-Journal Staff

Exelon has filed a request to relocate its Emergency Operations Facility (EOF) for TMI from its Harrisburg location to its EOF in Coatesville. The Coatesville location currently serves the Limerick and Peach Bottom sites.

Ralph DeSantis, communications manager for Exelon Nuclear says that "The move would provide more technical and administrative support to manage the response to an event, more resources within one.

"First of all, the primary response to an emergency situation at TMI would be at that site where the support organization would go," DeSantis said.

DeSantis said that it should be transparent to residents of Dauphin County that the people at TMI are trained and practice all the time in the case of an event.

Letters of inquiry may be sent to:
 U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission
 Office of Public Affairs-Region 1
 475 Allendale Road
 King of Prussia, Pa 19406

A federal drill will be held to test government ability to respond to an emergency at Three Mile Island the week of May 21. Federal evaluators will send their reports to Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) headquarters in Washington, D.C. within 30 days of the drill. FEMA Regional officials will send the final report within 90 days to the NRC, the state FEMA headquarters and the Regional Assistance Committee members. The report will be available to the public 120 days after the exercise.

FEMA is planning a public meeting about the exercise. The meeting is set for 3:30 p.m. May 25, in the Harrisburg East Holiday Inn, 4751 Lindle Road, Harrisburg. Planned speakers include representatives from FEMA and the commonwealth. The meeting will provide an event overview.

The public can submit specific questions to FEMA Region III Acting Director Peter G. Cote, at FEMA, 615 Chestnut St., Philadelphia 19106.

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Skimping on PR will harm TMI

6/14/07

BY DOUGLAS BEDELL

AS I SEE IT

Nuclear plant operators are acting as though nuclear power can rebound without taking the public and the news media seriously. No way, one hopes.

Newly consolidated megagenerators, like Exelon Corp. and FirstEnergy Corp., are running their nuclear plants in mutually supportive regional clusters. Nuclear regionalism may have advantages in technical terms. That's for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to weigh.

But the NRC doesn't involve itself in the utilities' public relations. With their zeal for operational efficiency, the power companies are slighting what it takes to ensure the trust and confidence that are needed, in the most fundamental terms, for a nuclear resurgence. Relate well to the media and the public, explain about a plant, report on it faithfully, and you have a good chance of it being understood and accepted. Let the media rankle and people be surprised by alarming-sounding news without readily available spokespeople and the old nuclear qualms return.

GPU Nuclear, TMI's former operator, had to adopt an open, responsive approach to communication following the 1979 accident at Unit 2. But having done so, it rebuilt credibility and acceptance that is now endangered by an Exelon communications pullback.

Currently Exelon is asking the NRC to approve a "standardized emergency plan" for its Pennsylvania nuclear plants, including TMI. One feature of the plan would separate TMI's media center in Lower Paxton Twp. — its "Joint Information Center" — from the Emergency Operations Facility where key aspects of a high-level TMI emergency would be managed. The "EOF" would be moved to Coatesville, in Chester County, some 75 miles from the TMI media center, and consolidated with the emergency center for Exelon's Peach Bottom and Limerick plants.

Dropping a "collocated" emergency center — management and media at

one place — reverses GPU Nuclear's approach. It would create a potential for confusion and misinformation, no matter how technically impressive the links between Coatesville and the TMI media center might be.

But that isn't all that has been occurring in TMI's communications eclipse. As Ralph DeSantis, a friend and former colleague of mine and Exelon's regional communications manager puts it, the company is announcing only "significant things" about TMI-1. And that doesn't include, as it did under GPU Nuclear, such things as routine plant shutdowns or a request Exelon made last February to the NRC for an "exigent" amendment to TMI-1's operating license to deal with a pipe leak that threatened to cause an unplanned shutdown. Instead of being announced and explained in a TMI news release, word of the request appeared in a small-print legal notice placed in *The Patriot-News* by the NRC. No other word of it appeared in the Harrisburg media.

TMI's crowning relational re-trenchment has been the reduction of the plant's onsite communications staff from 11 when I retired in 1994 to one-and-a-half today. Exelon is re-training the news media to call Coatesville for information on TMI. Anyone who calls the old TMI public information number today gets a recording pledging a callback "shortly." But it may not be until the next day that the call is returned.

"I've never gotten feedback from anyone in the media that, 'I missed a deadline,'" says Dave Carl, TMI's senior communications representative. Carl himself is based in Kennett Square, Exelon's regional headquarters, but spends at least half of his time at TMI.

Sadly, it's very likely true that no one in the media has complained about the new approach. The Harrisburg media are acquiescing in

changes that make their job harder and TMI less accessible. And Exelon seems heedless of the fact that, should an emergency occur, the most important consumers of information from TMI are local, not regional. The neighbors count most.

Exelon, which brought together the Philadelphia Electric Co. and Chicago's Unicom (formerly Commonwealth Edison), operates 20 percent of the nation's nuclear power capacity. Its approach to public relations reflects that being taken throughout the U.S. industry.

The nuclear utilities would like their plants to be viewed simply as generating stations. But nuclear plants are uniquely scary to people. At TMI in the post-accident years we were readily available to the media and public officials. We corrected misinformation about the plant. The only questions we turned aside were from book writers who would have required inordinate attention without any eventual recourse.

TMI-1 has been operating very well, setting world records for lengthy runs. Much was learned and applied from the TMI-2 accident and nuclear plants are safer for it. Dedicated TMI-1 plant people are assigned to support communications in an emergency. But the root cause of the Unit 2 accident was hubris — overconfidence and self-satisfaction by the plant's designers and management. Something like it could return.

Last December, FirstEnergy's Beaver Valley 2 plant outside Pittsburgh had an "unusual event," the lowest emergency level, and didn't issue a news release. Worse, it took offense when the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency did.

Skimping on what, after TMI-2, the Kemeny Commission called the "public's right to know" about nuclear plants is the way to run a nuclear lottery, not engineer a liftoff.

A one-time newspaperman, Douglas Bedell was TMI's media relations manager and then its communications manager after the Unit 2 accident.

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Locals hit TMI communication

Officials say new owner blindsides them

BY BRETT LIEBERMAN
OF OUR WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON — Three Mile Island's operators beefed up their communications staffs and sent representatives to monthly municipal meetings to keep residents better informed in the aftermath of the 1979 nuclear power plant accident that remains the nation's worst.

Two decades later, community leaders and emergency management officials are troubled by what they call a lack of effort by TMI's new operator, Exelon Nuclear

Corp., to keep them in the know on even minor matters.

"Ever since the accident, they've been coming to our meetings," said Frank Linn Sr., a Lower Swatara Twp. commissioner for the last 27 years. "It stopped when the new people came on board."

"I don't think we get timely information, and in many cases I'm not sure they're even asking our opinion," said Michael Wertz, Dauphin County's emergency management coordinator. "When you quit communicating, I think that you lose a familiarity and you lose a trust."

A spokesman for Exelon Nuclear called the criticism unfounded and said the company continues to inform local leaders about plant operations.

"We have a commitment to be open and honest with the public around Three Mile Island," said Ralph DeSantis, adding that plant representatives still attend many local government meetings.

Local officials cited these as the latest examples of shortcomings:

■ They said TMI's operator sprung



LAURA MATHEWS / OF THE PATRIOT-NEWS

"They don't know how people feel around this area. This is one guy who lived around here when it was a ghost town. I still have a fear of the nuclear power."

— Frank Linn Sr.,
Lower Swatara Twp.
commissioner

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TMI/Sharing of proposals urged

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its plan on the county to relocate the plant's emergency operation facility to Coatesville without advance notice during a meeting scheduled to discuss other matters. Exelon officials then wanted county representatives to sign a letter that said they supported the move.

■ The Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency heard months earlier that the company was thinking about moving the operations center. The first formal word came last month in a Nuclear Regulatory Commission news release.

■ Exelon had no plans to notify the community last week when TMI went offline to repair a faulty main transformer. TMI's former operators and other nuclear plants routinely issued advisories in similar situations.

Wertz and his counterparts from Cumberland, Lancaster, Lebanon and York counties met with TMI officials in Gettysburg yesterday to express their concerns.

DeSantis questioned claims by county and state officials that they were blindsided by the proposal to relocate the emergency operations center. He cited a Nov. 30, 2000, letter to PEMA and the five counties around TMI as well as meetings on Jan. 19 and May 11.

PEMA spokesman Marko Bourne had a different recollection. "We had heard that they were considering this. We hadn't seen any package or proposal until just before the NRC meeting," he said.

Many local officials trace the changes to GPU Inc.'s 1999 sale of TMI to AmerGen Energy Co., a partnership between PECO Energy Co. and British Energy Co. of Scotland. PECO and Unicom Corp. later merged to form Exelon.

Deregulation and consolidation of the utility industry has prompted efforts to reduce staff at TMI, achieve efficiencies by standardizing operations and cut costs across the 17 reactors operated by Exelon, the nation's largest nuclear plant operator, local officials said.

TMI's staff has shrunk from

around 2,000 employees when Unit 1 and Unit 2 were operating to about 600 today. Many veteran employees have been cut or transferred as part of Exelon's rotation of workers among plants. The result is fewer people with institutional knowledge of TMI, critics and area leaders said.

"They don't know how people feel around this area," said Linn. "This is one guy who lived around here when it was a ghost town. I still have a fear of the nuclear power."

After the 1979 accident, GPU increased the plant's communications staff from two to close to two dozen in a public outreach effort unparalleled in the nuclear industry, former TMI spokeswoman Mary Wells said.

"We were really still in accident recovery mode in terms of the public," said Wells, who no longer works for TMI. "There were still anxieties in the public in terms of everything they saw or heard."

Any change in informing the community about operations at TMI has been part of the continuation that has occurred over the last 20 years and not isolated to Exelon's management, said DeSantis, an 18-year GPU veteran.

"The No. 1 thing people are interested in knowing is the plant being operated safely," he said. "It now has much more capability than it ever had when it was with GPU."

An organization that does receive regular updates from Exelon is the EFMR Monitoring Group, a nonprofit watchdog that has legal agreements with Exelon and AmerGen to provide timely copies of communications with the NRC. EFMR also claims to have seen a change in the flow of information.

"After the accident, GPU became acutely aware and sensitive to public information," said Eric Epstein of EFMR and TMI Alert. "Exelon operates in a vacuum. They have made no effort to network with the community or local leaders."

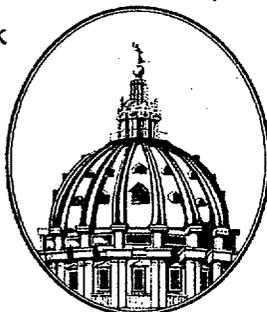
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UNACCEPTABLE

Reducing TMI's emergency staff won't sit well with midstate residents

In the realm of bad ideas and inattention to history is a plan by the owner of the Three Mile Island nuclear plant to move its emergency operations center 50 miles away.

Exelon Nuclear Corp. also is asking the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to reduce its emergency planning staff and extend the personnel response time in the event of an emergency from 30 minutes to 60 minutes.

The company claims the consolidation of emergency planning for its TMI, Peach Bottom and Limerick nuclear plants at Coatesville would be efficient, would provide better training and would standardize operations.

In other words, the nation's largest operator of nuclear plants is trying to save money.

We have great fondness for efficiency and cost effectiveness. But in our view, any such benefits that might derive from this move would vanish in a flash the moment an actual emergency began.

It's difficult to fathom how the owners of a nuclear plant a few feet from a sister reactor that was crippled by the nation's worst nuclear accident could overlook the fact that poor communication was a defining characteristic of that scary event.

Yes, the company would maintain its Joint Information Center in Lower Paxton Twp. at the site of the current TMI emergency operation presence. But imagine the opportunity for error, conflicting statements and confusion during an emergency for the news media — and ultimately the public — when the company's public relations apparatus is in one place and the officials managing the emergency are in another, 50 or so miles distant.

The problem is further compounded by what local and state emergency officials say is a night-and-day change in the power plant operator's manner of communication with them since Exelon

bought TMI from GPU.

"The President's Commission on The Accident at Three Mile Island," the so-called Kemeny Report, noted that "the quality of information provided to the public in the event of a nuclear plant accident has a significant bearing on the capacity of the people to respond to the accident, on their mental health, and on their willingness to accept guidance from responsible public officials."

It further notes that "the handling of information during the first three days of the [1979] accident" by TMI's then-owner, Metropolitan Edison, "resulted in loss of its credibility as an information source with state and local officials, as well as with the news media."

Exelon's actions suggest a corporate arrogance not unlike that shown by Met Ed before and during the initial stages of the accident 22 years ago that helped create a nightmare for the company and the people of central Pennsylvania.

The emergency personnel responsible for managing any crisis at a nuclear plant should be within a reasonable distance of the plant to facilitate familiarity with the unit and its operational staff, to better work with local and state emergency officials, and to understand the mood of the public in the event of an accident.

While the NRC may have permitted consolidation of emergency operations for other nuclear plants, those of us who've had experience with a serious nuclear mishap find such a move unacceptable. The nuclear agency also needs to insist that Exelon fully cooperate with local and state emergency officials, or begin imposing sufficient fines to compel compliance.

The worst of all worlds would be to have a nuclear regulator as insensitive to the needs of the one community in America that has lived through a nuclear scare as the company that is now operating the remaining TMI reactor.