

Davis-BesseNPEm Resource

From: Cooper, Paula
Sent: Tuesday, January 11, 2011 1:54 PM
To: Cooper, Paula
Attachments: [Untitled].pdf

Hearing Identifier: Davis_BesseLicenseRenewal_Saf_NonPublic
Email Number: 851

Mail Envelope Properties (eff8bf53-92f9-4b53-85eb-32b1d0d821fc)

Subject:
Sent Date: 1/11/2011 1:53:33 PM
Received Date: 1/11/2011 1:53:36 PM
From: Cooper, Paula

Created By: Paula.Cooper@nrc.gov

Recipients:
"Cooper, Paula" <Paula.Cooper@nrc.gov>
Tracking Status: None

Post Office: TWMS01.nrc.gov

Files	Size	Date & Time
MESSAGE	2	1/11/2011 1:53:36 PM
[Untitled].pdf	1205213	

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Sensitivity: Normal
Expiration Date:
Recipients Received:

Davis-Besse licensing foes see need to gather now

40 speak at 'People's Hearing' to take videotaped testimony

Published 12/19/10 in *The Toledo Blade*

By TOM HENRY

BLADE STAFF WRITER

At first, it wasn't clear just how many people would actually show up in Toledo's Old West End Saturday for what was billed as the "People's Hearing" on FirstEnergy Corp.'s plan to extend the life of its Davis-Besse nuclear plant in Ottawa County by another 20 years.

"Certainly, we don't have enough people in this room," one of the event co-organizers, Anita Rios of Toledo, lamented just after the noon starting time.

But soon, as a succession of speakers went up to the microphone at St. Mark's Episcopal Church, an eclectic group of about 40 people settled in -- not a huge turnout, but one that pleased organizers for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that it's hard getting people to give up valuable time on a cold Saturday afternoon in late December to hash out the pros and cons of nuclear power while most are making plans to be with families during the holidays.

That, coupled with the fact that Davis-Besse's license doesn't expire until April, 2017, and the fact the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has not yet turned down a single request for a license extension. FirstEnergy Corp., the plant's owner-operator, is seeking an extension through April, 2037.

"We, the people, will need to challenge not just FirstEnergy but also the NRC," Ms. Rios, co-chairman of the Green Party of Ohio, said.

The so-called "People's Hearing" was organized in response to a pair of officially sanctioned NRC meetings the agency held on Nov. 4 at Camp Perry, the Ohio National Guard base west of Port Clinton.

Activists from the Green Party, the Michigan and Ohio chapters of the Sierra Club, the Monroe-based Coalition for Nuclear Free Great Lakes, and Beyond Nuclear, a national group in Washington that opposes nuclear power, felt the affected public was underrepresented at the NRC meetings, in part because they were held two days after the election and at a site far removed from metropolitan areas. Though Saturday's event almost could have been mistaken for a rally, participants said it is important for the NRC to get opinions beyond Ottawa County because residents from southeastern Michigan to Cleveland live within the same 50-mile radius which would take the brunt of any radioactive fallout should an accident occur. Davis-Besse is Ottawa County's No. 1 employer and one of the greatest contributors to its tax base.

The two earlier sessions, which the NRC called environmental scoping meetings, drew about the same number of people as Saturday's event -- yet almost nothing was said about the environment at Camp Perry. Nearly everyone who attended those meetings worked for FirstEnergy or benefited from it financially.

Not so Saturday. Impassioned pleas were made on behalf of Lake Erie and public health at large. The comments were digitally recorded, and are being submitted to the NRC before its Dec. 27 cutoff date for public comment.

Scott Burnell, spokesman for the NRC's headquarters in the Washington suburb of Rockville, Md., has said NRC staffers will view Saturday's recorded proceedings if the discs are submitted in time. Nearly all the comments the NRC and other government agencies get outside of official proceedings are written statements. He said he is not aware of citizens ever submitting such a video as comments for the review of a relicensing application.

Those who spoke at Saturday's "People's Hearing" included Al Compaan, who holds the title of distinguished professor of physics emeritus from the University of Toledo. He had been chairman of UT's physics department until his recent retirement, and has been lauded by the state of Ohio for