

Residents bemoan fly ash contamination

But development of Gambrills site continues

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Exasperated Gambrills residents told state environmental and mining officials last week that their water is still polluted nearly three years after toxic fly ash seeped into their wells from a nearby disposal site.

Despite continuing pollution concerns, however, the owner of the land plans to continue mining at the site and continue developing a portion of it into another open-air shopping center along Route 3.

Nearly 200 residents filed into the community room inside the Village at Waugh Chapel shopping center Thursday night to voice their dissatisfaction during an informal public hearing set up by the Maryland Department of the Environment.

Many said that even when their well water is "working" properly, it is discolored.

"Sometimes the water is on, you know. Sometimes we have water, sometimes we don't," Joann Harris said of her father's Gambrills property. "This meeting really doesn't do us any good."

In fall 2006, county officials found traces of carcinogens from heavy metal in privately owned wells in the area.

Officials determined the cause of the contamination to be a coal combustion byproduct called fly ash that had been dumped into pits on the site by Baltimore Gas and Electric Co. and Constellation Energy Group since the mid-1990s.

Several residents have testified to local and federal authorities about the health problems, including organ failure, that contamination has caused.

Gambrills residents sued Constellation Energy in 2007 for knowingly dumping more than 4 million pounds of fly ash in craters at the site off Waugh Chapel Road and not warning residents that the ash was contaminating their well water.

Constellation settled with affected residents for \$45 million in November 2008, and along with Millersville-based BBSS Inc. - which uses the site as a sand and gravel mine - was fined \$1 million.

The county has since enacted a ban on any new fly ash disposal and new state regulations have been put in place for dump sites. The federal government also recently proposed two new fly ash regulations.

Meanwhile, the state is considering a plan for a new fly ash dump just across the Baltimore City line on Hawkins Point Road.

BBSS has promised residents that it would not put any new fly ash into the Gambrills quarry. A new \$300 million shopping center planned for the site would, however, displace and disturb some of the fly ash that remains there, company officials said Thursday night.

BBSS hired Geo-Technology Associates Inc. as a third-party watchdog to monitor fly ash activity on the site during development of the Village South at Waugh Chapel.

The shopping center would be built in small portions to limit fly ash exposure, BBSS President Rob Scrivener said.

The new development would cap the fly ash site, Scrivener said, and developers also have designed stormwater management systems to prevent runoff from reaching groundwater.

Residents protested the plan to renew the permit and proceed with development, saying that MDE and BBSS have not done an adequate job monitoring fly ash as it spreads underground and dealing with potential airborne exposure.

"The community believes you failed them," said Madonna Brennan, who helped start a development watchdog group for the Gambrills area.

Several residents complained that water was supposed to be provided to them and that they were never compensated for property damage at their homes during the course of the investigation.

BBSS, the site's owner, is in the process of renewing its permit to mine sand and gravel at the site for another five years.

Officials with the state and the companies were prepared Thursday night only to answer questions on the permit and site operations, but promised to get back to residents with answers to their concerns.

"Your observations and criticisms are fair," said Constellation spokesman Larry McDonnell, the only Constellation official at the meeting.

Ed Larrimore, an official with MDE's mining program, said BBSS' permit renewal already is in the final review process and that a public hearing was not required.

Residents have complained that state officials, Constellation and even the residents' own lawyers from the lawsuit haven't communicated with them enough on the remediation process.

Larrimore said his organization would agree to give residents another two weeks to send written testimony to be included in the permit renewal application, but that the department pretty much had all the information it needed.