

When Home Becomes a Gasfield

Danby residents hear firsthand reports of impacts

by Sue Smith-Heavenrich

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Ruth Tonachel gardens and raises chickens on 60 acres along Towanda Creek. A sixth-generation resident of Towanda, she now finds her life drastically changed by gas drilling in the region. On Friday, October 21 she showed Danby residents scenes of daily life for those living in Bradford County, PA.

“How do we honor what is important in our communities?” she asked, showing slides of gas wells snuggled up against the fence line of the town cemetery. She talked about ancient sites that held spiritual significance to the earliest peoples, and later became tourist attractions. Visitors look at the areas and they don’t see a big difference in the landscape, Tonachel said. But it’s what they don’t see; in these areas the archeological remnants are gone forever.

Having worked in folklore and journalism, Tonachel is interested in how the Marcellus rush has changed the culture of the community. A 2008 study noted that the cost of living in Towanda and surrounding area was well below the national average. Housing costs and taxes were the lowest in the state.

Three years later hotels are filled and rents have tripled, due to the influx of gas workers. “Five new hotels were built in Wyoming and Bradford counties,” Tonachel said. “One hotel was booked solid for three years.” The housing shortage is even more critical with the number of families displaced after the recent flood caused by tropical storm Lee.

Truck traffic is one thing that effects people the most. Route 6 through Towanda used to see 20 large trucks a day. “Now we’re counting more than 700 each day,” Tonachel said. The number of trucks isn’t the only thing on the rise. Tonachel noted that lawyers have seen an increase in the divorce rate; the jail has seen such an increase that they are housing their inmates on cots in the gym; and the local abuse and rape crisis center reports twice as many calls for help.

Tonachel noted the loss of farms from her area. Even though she has not signed any gas leases, she understands why farmers have. And many of them, mostly dairy farmers, have sold their herds. A few, however, are reinvesting their lease and royalty income, reclaiming old fields.

The ones hurt the most by drilling are the organic farmers, Tonachel said. Though they don’t sign leases, their neighbors do – and that effects their ability to market their produce, milk and meat to consumers seeking a “healthier” alternative.

People who signed leases, hoping to cash in on a resource that was hyped as a means to get America off foreign oil, feel they’ve been misled. Landsmen, describing the freshwater impoundments, told farmers and homeowners that these would be lakes they could swim and fish in. In reality, they are plastic-lined pits that, once the well begins producing, are filled with waste fluids. And they are surrounded by fences that keep everyone – including the landowner – out.

When someone asked about water testing, Tonachel said “get it tested sooner rather than later.” She spent about \$3,000 to have four wells on her property tested.

Property values are erratic, she said. One farmer sold his land for \$12,000/acre. But in the southeast part of the county, a Paradise Road homeowner saw his \$360,000 home lose more than 90% of its value; it was recently appraised at \$25,000 due to contaminated drinking water.

The biggest issue facing her town, says Tonachel, is that “it’s really difficult for people to talk civilly.” Many elected officials have leased, and they are trying to figure out how to “work with the gas companies,” she said. The conflicts aren’t just about drilling. Now that they’ve drilled the wells, the gas industry is pushing for industrial facilities such as wastewater treatment plants – facilities that will not benefit the people living near them.

Landowners aren’t realizing the royalties they hoped for, either. More than 1400 wells have been drilled in Bradford County, Tonachel said, but only 52 are actually shipping gas. “They’re drilling just to hold the leases,” she said. The companies can’t sell – or ship – the gas until they get the pipelines in.

“People are getting disillusioned,” Tonachel said. “Landowners whose leases have expired are not re-signing.”