



County could become home to nation's largest slaughterhouse

Carol Thompson 06-27-2009

by Carol Thompson

A proposed project that would make Oswego County the guinea pig for the nation's largest livestock slaughterhouse is being met with many questions from both the farming community and lawmakers.

Members of the Oswego County Legislature's Economic Development and Planning Committee heard from a representative of Bion Environmental Technologies, Inc. at during their Tuesday meeting regarding the project that would maintain 70,000 head of cattle at all times.

The slaughterhouse would be the largest in the nation and would be experimental because no such production plant has ever existed in the country. The livestock would be transported to the facility from parts of the United States and Canada.

"There's a lot of opposition to it," said Legislator Morris Sorbello, who serves as the chairman of the committee.

Eric Behling, who serves as president of the Oswego County Farm Bureau, said, "Local farmers oppose it."

One of the reasons local farmers oppose the project at this point is because there is much controversy surrounding cattle if they are found to be diseased with Mad Cow or any of the other toxic afflictions that can occur in livestock.

In some instances, cattle grazing within a specified mile radius would need to be quarantined or killed, which could leave some local farmers without their livelihood. "It's controversial," Sorbello said of the project.

The Farm Bureau is speaking against the project under the present plan, Behling said, which is vague at this stage. The location and other pertinent incidentals have yet to be presented.

Those in support of the proposal said it will create jobs. There is estimated to be 400 jobs projected for the slaughterhouse with another 188 in support positions. It is anticipated that many of the slaughterhouse positions would be filled by Mexicans.

That brought concerns from some legislators who have questioned the need for housing, the impact of the potential increase in school enrollment, and the possibility of over-burdening the welfare system.

Legislators said after the meeting that they were told the company would pay "decent wages" and that if Mexicans are employed, they will be "legal immigrants."

The manure from the cattle would be used for ethanol and the company would like to use distillers grain to feed the cattle. The system is "sophisticated" and that has Behling and other farmers concerned.

"There has never been one (slaughterhouse) this large in the United States," Behling said, adding that the county would be the "guinea pig."

The Farm Bureau, Behling said, is not totally against the project, but does feel strongly that the company needs to start on a much smaller scale with a pilot program.

St. Lawrence County had also been approached and put together a task force to weigh the pros and cons. Behling urged legislators to do the same thing. "We need a task force to research the problems that could arise," he said.

Along with the potential for disease among the cattle population and the potential to overburden the school and welfare systems, those opposed are concerned about odor and manure on the roads during livestock transport.

The project is very preliminary and Behling said that he hopes lawmakers carefully research the proposal prior to making a commitment. Those voicing opposition also questioned whether the company has factored in the probability of severe weather, something that could impact the project.

Behling said another concern is that Bion would like to expand beyond the 70,000 number.

The project would require approximately 500 acres. They would not have to be contiguous but Behling said if divided, each would still need to maintain many cattle per farm. Currently, he said, cattle farmers average 170 head per farm.

The legislature took no action and Sorbello said a task force may be formed to further explore the pros and cons. Legislators also want to seek input from the public. Several have noted that they have received telephone calls and letters from farmers in opposition. "Of course we have to present this to the public and get their opinion, too," Sorbello said.

Behling stressed that there needs to be a pilot program. "We don't think they have all their ducks in a row," Behling said of the company.