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Neighbor from Hell?

Tuesday, March 20th, 2012

Lower Puna residents say Puna Geothermal Venture is gassing them-again.

By Alan D. McNarie

When Billy Kenoi rolled into Pahoa last week for a "talk story" meeting with Lower Puna residents, he got an earful on an old topic: geothermal power. Puna Geothermal Venture, the state's only operating geothermal power plant, has recently expanded its capacity and is drilling new wells. The county plans to run buses on hydrogen created with geothermal power at PGV. Talk has even been revived of an undersea cable to deliver power from PGV to O'ahu. But Kenoi found that Puna residents themselves were still far from united behind the idea of geothermal expansion. At the often-raucous meeting, geothermal's vocal detractors appeared to outnumber its supporters by at least two to one. For some, the sight of drill rigs operating again on Pu'u Honu'ula in lower Puna dragged up memories of the bitter years when PGV began, and well blowouts and toxic gas leaks forced repeated evacuations of nearby residents. Others pointed out that they were living off-grid, and wondered why their district should suffer to supply power for the more profligate lifestyles of others. Still others contended that biofuels, solar, wind and conservation would be better answers. Yet others complained that the current push for geothermal expansion was happening without even consulting them.



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"Permits have been issued and the project is going forward. Of course, we are being told by people outside of the community and after the fact that it is for the good of the state and for its people. There has been no discussion with the community of Puna, or for that matter, with the residents of Hawai'i," stated one resident. "The decision was made by people outside this community: the people with power."

One of those who confronted Kenoi at the meeting was Aurora Martinovich, who has been trying for four years to get the county to relocate her and her family by using moneys in a fund set aside for that purpose. Martinovich had lived through the disastrous blowouts of the 1990s, when she and her family had to be evacuated for six months in 1991 because of leaking dangerous gases, including hydrogen sulfide. Now another well is being drilled on above her house, on the same side of Pu'u Honu'ula where two previous wells had blown out, and she claims she, her family, their livestock and pets are being gassed again.

"Come to my house," she urged Kenoi. "You can sleep there tonight. You can find out what it's like to live with a drilling rig 24 hours a day."

"I'm sick, my family's sick, our goats are sick," Martinovich told Big Island Weekly. "I'm coughing phlegm for a good two hours every morning and we get gassed every night...my household and the neighbors were getting skin rashes. Our goats are acting lethargic. They don't want to eat." (Martinovich



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owns a small herd of milking goats.) It feels like the blowout of 1991, when they capped it [the well] but it was still leaking underground."

Problems got much worse, she said, after lightning apparently struck the plant on November 8 of last year. That day, she said, sulfurous fumes became so bad that she ended up in the emergency room. Afterwards, members of her family developed sores and skin rashes, nausea and diarrhea. They're also suffering from sleep deprivation, both from the jet-engine-like noise of the plant itself and from the drilling rig, which has been operating day and night. In the morning, she says, diesel fumes from the drill rig surround her house.

Martinovich's next-door neighbor, David Mengel, corroborates most of her allegations.

"The day of the lightning strike, it smelled like rotten eggs times 100," he said. "My nose started running and plugged up, my throat started wheezing, and my eyes were watering. People started getting their cars and leaving."

Even before the drilling started up again, he said, the noise from the plant alone was "barely tolerable," often as loud as a jet engine. But since the drilling began, he said, it had become much worse.

"They tend to do the noisiest work after midnight," he said. For the past week, the worst had come "at two o'clock in the morning" with "extraordinarily loud noises like you're dropping a five-ton hollow metal tube on rock." He also complained of low-frequency vibrations coming into his house via the plumbing pipes. "Since this drilling started, I get this concussive sound, like a low wow-wow-wow. I feel almost queasy when I walk into the bathroom."

Martinovich claims that she called plant manager Mike Kaleikini after the lightning strike and that he told her, "This is the worst possible thing that could happen to a power plant." When she later suggested to him that gases were leaking underground as they had after the 1991 blowout, she claims, he replied, "I wouldn't doubt it."

Kaleikini disputes those claims.

"No, no, no, no, no," he told BIW. "She called me and she mentioned that, and she said she knows it's not from us.....It's not like lightning hit the pipes and the pipes burst open. That's not the case at all."

Of the night of the lightning strike, he said, "Lightning did not cause damage. What lightning does is it does damage to the grid that can affect the plant. Trees can fall on a line so that we can't transmit." On the night of the lightning strike, he said, "I know that we had interruptions of the grid. I kind of recall that the plant may have gone offline for a short period of time." When the plant goes offline," he said, "we shut the wells down."

Kaleikini noted that the plant was required to monitor noise levels and levels of hydrogen sulfide "24/7," and the level of hydrogen sulfide allowed under PGV's operating permit was far below that for which OSHA required workers to wear protective gear. He also noted, "We have the response line where everyone can call in with a question or concern.

965-8843."

But Martinovich is less than impressed with the hydrogen sulfide monitoring system. There is, in fact, a monitoring station on the slope just above the Martinovich residence. But the intake for the H2S monitor is higher than Martinovich can reach. The other monitoring stations, Martinovich says, are on hills. H2S is a heavier-than-air gas that travels downhill and stays close to the ground. The monitoring system, she believes, was set up to not get results.

"Last year, the Department of Health took out the one monitor that's not on a hill," she said.

Lisa Young, environmental health specialist at DOH's Clean Air Branch, acknowledged that the monitor had been removed. The reasons, she said were "electrical safety issues, lease expiration, budget reduction and low hydrogen sulfide values." She said that the DOH did lower the height of the probes to 1.9 meters.

But that lowering makes little difference, Martinovich contends, if the monitoring equipment is on a rise. And while Young said 1.9 meters was "about breathing height or a little over," it would actually be about the height of a tall man standing: it wouldn't catch gas at, say, the level of people sleeping in a house down the slope, as Martinovich's family is.

The monitor above Martinovich's home, which is still well above 1.8 meters, was installed by PGV, not the DOH.

"We were directed to install them in a specific way," maintained Kaleikini. "It is

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per the Department of Health and the EPA requirements. It wouldn't be right for a developer to install monitoring equipment the way a developer wanted to."

Mangel is equally unimpressed with the "response line." The problem, he said, was that no one responded. When he called the line, he said, "The guy said, 'Well, we don't work for them. We just take the messages for them. They'd been getting a lot of messages, which may be why they're backed up.'"

Martinovich says no one at PGV has ever returned her calls except Kaleikini, whom she says is "worth his weight in gold." When the lightning incident occurred on November 8, she says, Kaleikini called her "the moment it happened." She is much less complimentary of Ormat, PGV's Israeli parent company, whom she blames for treating the community as adversaries. When the company first began drilling, she said, it posted guards just above her property.

"They told me, 'I'm not here to protect your property.' They were here to take down the license plates of everybody who came to our house."

She also has little respect for the current mayor's administration. Under former mayor Harry Kim, she said, her request for relocation had been moving forward smoothly, but "It went wrong with this administration." Instead of sending an appraiser to her house, the Kenoi administration sent "lawyers and zoning people," who kept finding county code violations that needed to be fixed before the deal went forward. "Basically, it was an investigation with a fine-toothed comb," Martinovich claimed. She spent thousands of dollars resolving those issues, only to be told that the county suspected that her house was too close to the road, violating a setback rule; it requested that she hire a surveyor to check the setback.

"They want me to spend a thousand dollars for a surveyor to prove their allegation," she fumed.

The county has relocated five other families, she said, although one resident died of pulmonary edema before the relocation went through-and pulmonary edema, she told Kenoi at the Pahoia meeting, could be caused by ammonia, another chemical present in geothermal steam. She also noted that when Planning Director Bobby Jean Leithead-Todd was with Corporation Counsel, she'd supported the relocation of at least one resident who didn't qualify for relocation under the rules of the Relocation Fund. Meanwhile, she said, money from the county's geothermal royalties that had been reserved for relocation had been spent on other projects, such as improvements at the Pahoia transfer station-a charge that Kenoi denied.

"The relocation fund has not been used for any other reason," he said. "The relocation fund sits right there for relocation." The money for the improvements, he said, came from a separate "asset fund."

Leithead-Todd gave BIW a different version of what had happened.

"The county council changed the county code and they changed the uses for which the fund can be used," she told BIW. "It used to be the 'relocation fund.' Now it's called the 'relocation and community benefits fund.' You have to keep at least a minimum of a million dollars in the fund in case someone comes forward and asks to be relocated." But the money, she said, had also been used for numerous Puna community improvements, including repaving roads, improving intersections and purchasing buses.

Leithead-Todd said the county had actually decided to waive its demand for a surveyor to determine if Martinovich's house was properly set back from the road. The only remaining issue, Leithead-Todd said, was whether Martinovich or the relocation fund should pay Martinovich's realtor's fee, which will probably amount to about \$28,000. Martinovich claims that the rules for the relocation fund require the county to pay related expenses, including the realtor's commission. Her realtor is asking a 10 percent commission. Leithead-Todd thinks that's excessive, and that realtor's commission usually comes from the money paid to the seller. She's checking with the county's lawyers and looking at what was done with previous relocations.

"If we've done it for others in the past, we'll certainly do it for her," Leithead-Todd said. But earlier in the conversation, she'd mentioned the Martinovich case was the "first time that we've dealt with the real estate agent with the relocation fund."

But Leithead-Todd believes that the remaining issues will be resolved, and hopes that Martinovich and her family can be moved in about two months.

For Martinovich, that's two more months of hell. She says she's found a place to move to, but can't close the deal until the county gives its okay on purchasing her old home. Rental is not a viable option, she says, because of her animals. But she's looking for temporary homes for her goats.

Mangel is also looking for another place. But he isn't eligible for relocation money, because he rents. Meanwhile, he's considering helping to organize some sort of civil disobedience action to bring "pressure" on the company, which he thinks is "not appropriately regulated and not appropriately located."

"Would you like to have a 747 engine running in your back yard?" he told BIW. "Would you like to have toxic chemicals flowing into your home and potentially killing you? That's the message that needs to be gotten out. This is not a benign technology."

Martinovich, at this point, simply wants to get out.

"I don't want to have a confrontation," she says. "I just want to sleep at night, take care of my family, keep my goats and breathe clean air."

And what happens to her house if the county does buy it? It will be sold at auction, and likely occupied by another family, who won't be eligible for relocation.

"It's a risk they take," said Leithead-Todd. "You disclose that it's close to PGV."

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One response

diverdave says:

March 21, 2012 at 12:13 pm

+2

Billy Kenoi doesn't care about Puna anymore. All he cares about is getting elected again. He knows that most people down there don't vote anyway.

This Leithead-Todd is a gem too, isn't she? She knows that the Martinovich home is unhealthy and uninhabitable. Yet, she will have no problem selling it to another family! "It's a risk they take". WOW! It's time to do more than just clean out this home, it's time to clean house at the Mayor's Office.

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