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Entergy safety panel holds first public sessions

By Abby Luby



Photo by Abby Luby

Singing group The Raging Grannies serenade the Independent Safety Assessment panel for Indian Point at Monday's public sessions. The Grannies sing songs opposing the power plant.

The special panel of experts hired by Entergy to assess safety at its Indian Point nuclear plants held two public sessions on Monday to get feedback on the reactors.

Eleven of the 12 panelists, all specialists in the nuclear industry field, heard questions and comments from people both supporting and opposing the operation of the plant. There was sparse attendance at the first meeting, which was preceded by a press conference held by New York State labor leaders.

"I'm here speaking on behalf of 2.5 million men and women of labor in New York State and to tell the Independent Safety Evaluation panel that we support the continued operation of this safe, secure and necessary power plant," said Jerry Connolly, a retired business manager and board member of Boilermakers Local 5 New York. "We want to make sure that all of the safety concerns are being addressed."

About 100 people attended the second meeting, with many plant workers and union members present. The meeting was boycotted by IPSEC (Indian Point Safe Energy Coalition), a group opposing the plant's operation. They claimed that since Entergy was paying the panel, the study would be a conflict of interest and not truly independent.

One IPSEC member that didn't boycott the meeting was Gary Shaw. "It is somewhat peculiar that the NRC and Entergy would oppose the independent safety assessment [legislation] proposed in Congress and then hire their own Independent Safety Evaluation Panel," he said. Others praised the panel for their experience in the industry. Craig Upshaw, a member of Local 740, countered Shaw's skepticism.

"Many on the panel are former naval officers and they have very high integrity," he said. "It doesn't matter who is paying for the board, but if anyone doesn't like it why don't they pony up and get a panel of their own."

Legislation was introduced two years ago requiring an independent safety assessment as part of Entergy's re-licensing process in both the House and the Senate. To date, the bill is still in committee.

After an independent assessment was conducted at the Maine Yankee plant in Wiscasset, Maine, the plant shut down in 1997. The safety assessment team included nuclear experts of the NRC (Nuclear Regulatory Commission), officials of the Maine state government and non-governmental nuclear experts.

Manna Jo Green, the environmental director of Clearwater, urged the panel to resign en masse.

"Public policy would require a true independent safety analysis and I don't think this is," she said. "So I request that all of you consider resigning and to preserve your integrity, call on Congress to amend the Atomic Energy Act and create a truly independent safety analysis for Indian Point and all nuclear power plants."

The Raging Grannies, a group of older women that frequently serenaded the public against Indian Point, sang two songs urging to close the plant.

Local volunteer firefighter Tom Johnson praised safety features at Indian Point.

"I've worked with the folks at the plant and I am always inspired by their hazmat (hazardous materials) and

evacuation capabilities,” he said.

Eliot Summers, a medical radiologist of Montrose who lives within sight of Indian Point, said he wanted panel members to itemize in their report their connections to the nuclear industry.

“I think it’s appropriate to establish bona fide proof to enter into the record all of your current financial ties to the nuclear industry,” he said. “That should include pensions and stocks from nuclear-related companies and other contracting work you have done.”

Summers told the panel that although an accident or meltdown is highly unlikely, if it did happen, their names will be on the report claiming the plant was safe.

“You will possibly be remembered in the 21st century as the people who told us this was a safe plant or that it isn’t,” he said. “I ask you to do the job with all the diligence that you have.”

Plant workers said safety rules were stringent. Scott Tadesco, a Peekskill resident and a welder that just worked during Indian Point’s re-fueling said he was speaking for members in his union, local 740.

“I’ve worked at a dozen nuclear power plants and Indian Point is one of the most difficult to be admitted to for work,” said Tadesco. “I had to take two tests to even get inside to solder pipes. They have very serious criteria I see that is imposed on workers at Indian Point.”

Other comments offered more technical information about the plant that could affect safety.

Karl Jacobs, a Cortlandt Manor resident and a senior nuclear operator engineer who worked at Indian Point when it was owned by Con Ed, said there were serious problems with cracks in the pressure vessel at the plant (reactor pressure vessels contain the nuclear fuel and are made of thick steel plates that are welded together).

“There’s cracking going on in the pressure vessel head that Entergy has neglected to take care of,” said Jacobs. “Right now Entergy has elected not to replace this head, which they make clear in their current license renewal application. Their approach or lack of approach is very unusual because it’s a current licensing issue. The cracks are as much as a half inch, which is a big size for this area.”

Margo Sheppard of Westchester Citizens Awareness Network, an organization seeking to shutter the plant, asked the panel how it would measure the viability and

condition of inaccessible pipes and welds “that have been carrying corrosive Hudson River water for decades.” Sheppard went on to say, “The current metric is simply drilling test wells which can do nothing other than let the company and the NRC know when a breach has already occurred. What metric will the panel suggest for preempting future breaches?”

At the meeting’s end, the panel’s co chair, Dr. James Rhodes, said the panel will review comments. “Now we will begin our work,” he said. “Once the evaluation is complete, we will issue our report to the NRC, Entergy, public officials and the general public.” Rhodes added that there was information he wasn’t familiar with.

“We’ve heard new material about the integrity of the reactor vessels,” he said. “We will certainly look at that.”