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Tuesday September 19, 2006 Edition

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OMYA Grinding Plants Neighbors Hope Upcoming Study Will Resolve Concerns

Tuesday June 27, 2006

By Ed Barna

For several years, neighbors of the Omya calcium carbonate plant in Pittsford have been frustrated by difficulties in getting state officials to pay attention to the marble grinding operation's local impacts. OMYA currently employees approximately 300 people

Now there will be a comprehensive study, fulfilling a mandate from the state Legislature, to determine the facts about many of the neighbors' complaints. Interviews with some of them found that traffic, noise, dust, odors, and ground vibrations from blasting were all concerns, though probably the most serious was whether the village's drinking water had been affected by chemicals that the plant uses.

According to a June 21 release from Conservation Law Foundation Ventures, a non-profit affiliate of the CLFV that "works with clients to implement projects that have demonstrable environmental gain," the firms selected through an open bidding process were:

Cambridge (Massachusetts) Environmental Inc., a leading research and consulting firm, and Geosyntec Consultants, Inc., a nationally known geotechnical and hydrological consulting firm, through its regional office located in Acton, Massachusetts.

CLFV has been working this year to help bring a resolution to the local problems in Pittsford. CLFV has also played a role in brokering a collaboration that may result in a rail spur linking the Omya quarry in Middlebury with the Vermont Railway tracks three miles away--which would spare Route 7 from much of the heavy truck impact from Omya's

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use of trucks to bring raw material through Brandon to the Florence plant.

The Legislature authorized the upcoming study on June 16, 2005, by passing No. 65: An Act Relating to Solid Waste Facility Fees, Taxes and Certification (H.532 in the House). The "Section 5 Study," as many are now calling it, is to study both environmental and human health impacts of the Florence plant, with a report to be submitted to the Secretary of Natural Resources on or before Jan. 15, 2008.

Meanwhile, a consulting firm hired by Omya, TRC Environmental Corporation, found in early June that the levels of formaldehyde and acrolein at the stack of the smaller of the two OMYA facilities in Pittsford exceeded regulatory levels. Also, there was too much formaldehyde in the surrounding air.

According to public online information from the EPA, "Limited human studies have reported an association between formaldehyde exposure and lung and nasopharyngeal cancer." Also, "inhalation exposure to formaldehyde in humans can result in respiratory symptoms, and eye, nose, and throat irritation."

Omya promptly shut down the Omya East plant on June 13, though they said they had been assured by the experts that there was no danger to human health. Their release pointed out that "the concentration levels we found at our plant are no higher and in most cases lower than the state has reported as normal ambient levels in communities as disparate as Rutland, Burlington and Underhill."

The company decided that the probable cause was the stearic acid used in some processes, at high heat. Christian Jones, the Agency of Natural Resources air pollution compliance chief, said Omya had tried restarting the plant on June 22 at a lower temperature to see if that would resolve the problem.

But for the neighbors, and for their ally Annette Smith of Vermonters for a Clean Environment, the situation has seemed much simpler: Omya's permit says there should be no nuisance odors beyond the property line, and the thing stinks. Not only do the operations emit several disagreeable smells, some bad enough so people find it impossible to remain outdoors, there is one that causes throat irritation.

For the people who have formed Neighbors Concerned About Omya, dealing with the State has been like being a patient whose "anecdotal evidence" of severe pain doesn't match the medical description of the condition being treated, so the HMO won't pay for painkillers. Those contacted said nothing in state environmental procedures has given their personal experience any reality, validity, or value--and some wondered

whether the state officials involved are in OMYA's pocket.

Smith observed that there wasn't any action until the Vermont Law School's Environmental Law Project got involved, and Sen. Claire Ayer, D-Addison County/Brandon got involved. Ayer said while visiting Otter Valley Union High School on Monday that her interest started with her Senate committee assignments, taxes and the environment, Omya being a huge generator of tax revenues that almost inevitably influences its environment.

But Jones said the reality has nothing to do with political influence. His agency strives to get evidence about violations good enough to go to court with. Neighbors' complaints aren't enough, he said, because unfortunately, "we do get complaints that aren't valid."

The 1999 Omya permit that says there shouldn't be nuisance odors beyond the property line is still in effect, Jones said. They now know that such odors did emanate from Omya, but the company's initiatives in hiring a testing firm and shutting down Omya East have given the Pollution Control Division hope that the problems can be resolved without the expense to the taxpayers of lengthy litigation.

Time will tell what the findings may be (and they may not have much effect on the way blasting at the Hogback quarry in Florence makes peoples' houses shake). But for now, the process seems to be in a kind of honeymoon phase.

"I felt the process was fair, yielded a good result and was definitely the right approach," said Florence resident Lynn Silloway, who has served on the Oversight Team and whose property abuts the Omya facility (according to the CLFV release). "We are actively addressing the public's concerns through this process, and we are demonstrating our commitment to operating in an environmentally and socially responsible way." said Tony Colak, vice-president of operations at Omya.

Smith said in a statement, "VCE is pleased that Cambridge Environmental and their partner, GeoSyntec, were chosen through a competitive bidding process to conduct this legislatively-mandated study. We are confident that they will produce the kind of unbiased, scientifically-based data that will help answer long-standing questions about the safety of water and air and the impacts of Omya's operations on human health and the environment. We will continue working with the rest of the Oversight Team on this process, and hope that it will lead to answers to the concerns of Omya's neighbors." She said.

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