

## County shows overwhelming support for pellet plant

By Royce Armstrong, George County Times

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The Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) seemingly got their answer during a public hearing on the proposed wood pellet plant to be built in George County.

George Countians overwhelming support it. Nearly 300 people both crowded into and stood outside the County Administrative Building for almost three hours to express support for \$160 million project. The pellet plant will annually produce about 750 million metric tons of high density wood pellets to be used as power plant fuel in Europe and Japan, subject to the necessary permits.

About 10 people were opposed to the project, with most of the rest wearing stickers and voicing support for the plant.

The Gulf Coast Group of the Mississippi Chapter of the Sierra Club and the Dogwood alliance, based in Ashville, North Carolina, had expressed concerns about air quality resulting from the wood pellet production process. Both groups, along with environmental justice church groups, opposed the project.

MDEQ set up the public hearing in George County as the last step in its public comment period prior to either issuing or denying Enviva a permit to build the pellet plant. MDEQ opened the meeting with a description from the permit application of the air pollution concerns. The plant will emit tiny particles into the air in excess of standards established by the federal Clean Air Act. To mitigate this pollution, Enviva employs a system of scrubbers, filters and reverse osmosis, according to the permit application. This system brings the particulate matter released into the air well within Clean Air Act standards, MDEQ officials explained. The floor was then opened up for comments or questions.

The opposition, at best, seemed poorly informed about the project. One claim was the county had spent \$17 million to entice Enviva to George County. That individual went on to propose the county would be better served by using the \$17 million to subsidize local tree farmers. The \$17 million is actually tax breaks given by George County, Jackson County (for the port facility) and the State. It is not money spent, explained George County Communications Director Ken Flanagan, but tax incentives that will be more than offset in salaries, material purchases and other economic activity generated by the plant.

Those opposed to the plant also attempted to make an “environmental justice” and racial issue, claiming Enviva pellet plants are built in African-American neighborhoods, endangering African-Americans lives. As George Countians know, the pellet plant is being built in the county industrial park, miles away outside of town. It is going to be bordered on the west and south by two pole plants and American Tank & Vessel. On the east are thousands of acres of wooded land.

It was also claimed the pellet plant would consume vast acres of hardwood forest. According to Maria Moreno, Director of Communications for Enviva, the wood used in making the pellets will be approximately 80 percent pine and the remaining 20 percent from hardwood species using the lowest-quality wood produced during thinning’s and traditional saw timber harvest(such as pulpwood trees, tops, and limbs) as well as sawdust from sawmills. Furthermore, the pine used must come from landowners with sustainable forest management plan.

Supporters of the project pointed out this is the pine belt where pine trees grow readily and where many landowners have planted trees as an investment. This is an area that has in the past support multiple sawmills and paper company operations.

It was also pointed out George County has an unemployment rate about double the national rate. The economic benefit to the 90 or so direct jobs and two to three hundred indirect jobs will be huge for the community. MDEQ will take all the comments, both verbal and written, received over the past three months and them a part of the public record. The earliest it will meet to consider the application and the comments is Tuesday, June 11.

