

ROCKWOOL UPROAR

Unger: Require public meetings before major projects

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CHARLES TOWN – As citizens in Jefferson County continue to fight against the Rockwool insulation factory being built on a former orchard on the far outskirts of Ranson, State Sen. John Unger is offering an idea he says would address such controversies in the future.

In a statement released last week, Unger – a Berkeley County native who has served in the Senate since 1999 – said he'll introduce a bill next year to require public meetings in the area impacted by any air or water permits.

Such a move will be possible, of course, only if Unger wins another term on Nov. 6. He is opposed for re-election by Republican Mike Folk, a Martinsburg airline pilot who is a member of the House of Delegates.

The 16th District seat includes areas of both Jefferson and Berkeley counties.

"We've had a lot of concerns expressed with the clean air permit



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John Unger, who has served in the state Senate since 1999, says he'll introduce legislation next year that he says would allow the public to be better informed about major projects such as the Rockwool insulation factory coming to Ranson.

given to Rockwool," said Unger, who works as a pastor in Harpers Ferry. "Though the public comment period ran legally, a meeting was not held in the community that will be affected. I want to make sure that

in the future, our communities have a chance to give input to the processes that directly affect them."

The Rockwool facility is expected to bring up to 150 jobs to the county, but many have raised health

and safety concerns, pointing to the plant's location near North Jefferson Elementary, Wildwood Middle and Jefferson High.

The Department of Environmental Protection's Division of Air Quality policy regarding permits for projects such as Rockwool requires a notice of "intent to issue a permit," followed by a 45-day public comment period. Unger notes that now a public hearing is allowed, but not required.

"We need to do better," Unger said in his statement. "People who will be affected by development should be able to learn about it, express concerns and get their questions answered. There's absolutely no way Rockwool's air quality permits should have been approved without a public meeting being held in our community."

"If the citizens' voices had been heard, I believe these permits would not have been approved at all."

But some critics of Unger's proposal pointed out on Facebook that even if a public hearing on the air quality permits had been held in Ranson, many in the community

still might not have taken part in the discussion.

Though area newspapers in November carried stories about Rockwool's plans to build a factory and Rockwool ran ads and sent out mailers in the community in the months that followed, citizens didn't begin protesting until after a groundbreaking ceremony in late June.

"Public meetings won't do any good if people aren't paying attention," one county resident wrote on Facebook.

Last week, DEP Secretary Austin Caperton released a statement that described the planned Rockwool facility as "no threat" to the environment or to residents' health.

"Based on all available information that we have gathered and that we have reviewed, we see no threat to the health of our citizens and no threat to our environment," Caperton said in the statement. "Our scientists and engineers with the DEP have reviewed all available data and have assured me there is virtually no other state in America that would have denied this permit."

Jobs FROM PAGE A1

address citizens' worries about the factory, CCAR members boycotted the event and held a protest outside the center instead.

"It's been because of the community's behavior," Diehl said of the pullout of multiple business prospects. "I've lost all the work that I've done for the last nine months."

Diehl said the companies that had been considering Jefferson County were just what opponents of the Rockwool plant say they want here — technology, light industry, green companies.

He said the county began the recruitment efforts soon after Rockwool announced it had selected Ranson as the site of a sister plant to the Byhalia, Miss., facility that opened in 2014.

"We had a planning session and we all said here's what we need to focus on — light industry, advanced manufacturing, agriculture, small businesses, tourism. My focus had been on what everybody is saying I should focus on."

While it was Diehl's predecessor John Reisenweber who led negotiations to bring Rockwool to Jefferson County, Diehl defended the work. He said Jefferson County needs a more diverse economy with jobs that provide good wages for its residents.

"Half of the work force leaves Jefferson County to do exactly the kinds of jobs that Rockwool will be providing," he said. "We need to stand on our own two feet and stop relying on people who sleep in Jefferson County but go outside of Jefferson County to work."

"That's where our focus should be."

More manufacturing jobs, which offer better wages than service-sector work, would allow more people in Jefferson County to earn a living wage here, Diehl said.

"I think in our county 80 percent of the jobs

are service jobs and only 20 percent are manufacturing jobs," he said. "We have a whole lot of jobs in Jefferson County that are hospitality jobs, which are good to have, but the people who work those jobs are coming in to Jefferson County and they're going back home to Berkeley County and Morgan County because it's too expensive for them to live in Jefferson County."

"We need to have the jobs that pay a living wage here. We have to have a diverse economy, to have a vibrant economy. Rockwool is the kind of company we need in Jefferson County. We need to do something different than we have been doing. It is a springboard for the kinds of jobs we need in Jefferson County."

Lori Maloney, a leader with Concerned Citizens Against Rockwool, said the opposition to the project "is not anti-business. We are an advocate for appropriate development of Jefferson County, which includes appropriately sited manufacturing and light industry. But Rockwool? Residents are more than justified in calling for a full stop. From unfair tax breaks to toxic emissions by our schools, the JCDA's Rockwool deal is terrible for Jefferson County, and the more we learn the worse it looks."

Maloney said that the JCDA should find companies that match up to the Envision Jefferson 2035 Comprehensive Plan and that such businesses "should have absolutely no reservations about investing in Jefferson County."

She called on Diehl and others at the JCDA

"to work transparently to attract businesses that complement our economic strengths and improve our quality of life. The JCDA should conduct economic and environmental reviews and avoid unfair tax breaks. Until the JCDA reforms the way they operate, nobody is going to buy what they are selling."

Of "Project Shuttle"

Diehl says most people aren't familiar with the process involved in bringing a businesses into a new area.

"When a site consultant goes looking for a new location they draw a big circle on a map and say, we're looking for a site in this location, and then they go looking for properties that meet their criteria. They're looking to eliminate options at that time and if they see a property, the state economic development people would ask the county development authority to put the property on their website and then the development office begins to go through files in a given area."

Diehl said site consultants are looking for specific information about the site and the region, its roads, traffic, types of soil.

"They're going through to start eliminating properties," he said, adding names for the projects names follow the selection of some sites. "Project Shuttle" was literally pulled out of the air. You have to call it something and you're not going to use the company's name."

Diehl said as negotiations begin it becomes easier for state development office officials to discover what company is involved, information the company most often does not want announced. That's why companies require non-disclosure agreements.

"Everybody signs NDAs," Diehl said, noting the agreement also allows the jurisdiction to determine more information about the company's needs such as the number of workers and the anticipated revenue. "We have to be able to begin to figure out what we get out

"We need to have the jobs that pay a living wage here. We have to have a diverse economy, to have a vibrant economy. Rockwool is the kind of company we need in Jefferson County."

NIC DIEHL, Jefferson County Development Authority executive director I of the deal. It's standard practice. Otherwise the client goes away."

Diehl said the development office began doing its homework on Rockwool once that NDA was signed.

"We learned it is well thought of internationally, and among the greenest in the world, that is is super-concerned about environmental issues, and workers get regular raises, really good benefits and the company promotes from within," he said. "We were very comfortable with this company based on what we read."

In his interview with the *Spirit*, Diehl also pushed back at critics who accuse the development authority and the state economic development office of giving away the store.

"Everything is laid out in state Code. 'If you give this, then you get this,'" he said. "I can't discriminate who I give tax incentives to. That's in West Virginia State Code. It is what it is."

He also said the state and county did everything it is required to do to alert the public about Rockwool.

"We got zero public input," he said. "We had 40 open meetings before July 2018. It is crazy how many meetings there were. Nobody came."



Lori Maloney

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