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County board backs hydro at Gilboa, then plays ball

By R. J. Kelly (Contact)
Gazette Reporter

Saturday, July 19, 2008



Photographer: Barry Sloan
Mike Tarbell, educator at the Iroquois Indian Museum, pitches to Larry Phillips, Seward town supervisor, during a game of traditional Indian longball at the museum on Friday afternoon. Many county supervisors participated in the game of longball.



Schoharie County officials play the Native American game "Longball" after Friday's Board of Supervisors meeting at the Iroquois Indian Museum.
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In New York City's request to become a party to the FERC proceedings, city counsel Robert M. Loughney wrote that "the city retains an interest in developing the dams and reservoirs affected by the DCEC permit application. Thus, the city is carefully reviewing the [application] and analyzing its options with respect to such development at the sites proposed for construction as part of the Western Catskills Hydro Project."

Even though the city owns and operates the reservoirs and dams, Starheim contends that the FERC has authority over hydroelectric development.

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SCHOHARIE COUNTY – The county's 16-member Board of Supervisors voted unanimously Friday to support a proposal by the Delaware County Electric Cooperative to develop hydroelectric power facilities at the Schoharie Reservoir's Gilboa Dam and three other New York City reservoirs.

The vote followed a presentation of the plan by the cooperative's chief executive, Greg Starheim.

Starheim, a Gilboa resident, told supervisors the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission this week accepted the cooperative's May 8 preliminary permit application.

New York City officials on Thursday filed and applied to intervene in the review process, according to the FERC's Web site.

Those actions "start the clock" on the process, Starheim said.

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Starheim said city officials initially indicated last fall “they would not support the cooperative in any way ... and might fight against it.”

Last week, U.S. Sen. Charles E. Schumer released a letter to the New York City Department of Environmental Protection urging city officials to collaborate on the plan.

Schumer said in statement that “residents of these [watershed] counties have shouldered the burden of maintaining the highest quality of water to keep downstate’s drinking water supply pure ... with little local economic benefit in return.”

Schumer’s July 8 letter to city DEP Commissioner Emily Lloyd urged the agency “to cooperate with Delaware County Electric Cooperative to develop minimal impact hydro plants that do not impact the quality or quantity of drinking water.”

DEP officials have repeatedly declined to comment about the plan.

“We look forward to reviewing the proposal and to further discussing it,” DEP spokeswoman Mercedes Padilla said in an e-mail Friday.

Starheim said the plan for Gilboa would likely use four siphons to bring excess water over the dam to a powerhouse containing turbine generators.

It would not affect New York City drinking water supplies and flow would be controlled by the city’s dam operators.

“The environmental effects of this [project] are very minimal,” Starheim said.

The cooperative seeks to build similar power plants using surplus water or other downstream releases at the Cannonsville and Pepacton reservoirs in Delaware County and the Neversink Reservoir in Sullivan County.

It would potentially create a total of about 63 megawatts of electricity at peak flow, he said. About 23.5 megawatts might come from the Gilboa site, enough to power about 10,000 homes, according to Starheim.

Gilboa flows are typically seasonal, with most power potential in winter and spring.

The nonprofit rural cooperative now supplies electricity to about 20,000 member/customers in parts of Delaware, Schoharie, Otsego and Chenango counties, but Starheim noted that Gilboa-generated hydropower would likely be sold into the statewide electricity grid.

Schoharie County Board of Supervisors Chairman Earl Van Wormer III said he and county energy task force members met with Starheim last fall to discuss “ways to see what we can do here in Schoharie County to bring energy costs down.”

Van Wormer opened the meeting in the unusual setting of the Iroquois Indian Museum in Howes Cave with the revelation that he underwent surgery in April and radiation treatment for thyroid cancer.

Even though he kept his illness mostly private, he said, “I was totally overwhelmed by the [supportive] response by the people in the county.”

“From what I know right now, I’m in great shape,” he said.

In other matters, supervisors approved a local law giving military veterans of the Cold War – Sept. 2, 1945, to Dec. 26, 1991 – a potential 15 percent exemption of property assessment from county taxes.

The exemption would not exceed \$9,000 of assessed value multiplied by the state equalization rate. For veterans with service-connected disabilities, the percentage would be half of the disability rating, not to exceed \$30,000, multiplied by the state equalization rate.

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The meeting, which opened with a welcome in the Mohawk language by museum educator Mike Tarbell, was followed by a traditional game of Iroquois longball in which supervisors and other county employees participated.

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