

St. Tammany zoners delay ruling on garbage permit

Charlie Chappel - December 02, 2008 22:43PM

The St. Tammany Parish Zoning Commission, to boos and jeers from a large group of Covington area residents, Tuesday night tabled a zoning permit sought by a Texas company to build and operate a solid-waste transfer station north of the city.



CHUCK COOK / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE

People raise their hands showing their opposition to a zoning permit for a solid-waste transfer station during a meeting of the St. Tammany Parish Zoning Commission Tuesday, Dec. 2, 2008, at the St. Tammany Parish Council Chambers on Koop Drive near Mandeville. IESI, one of the nation's largest solid-waste companies, wants to build the station north of Covington. The issue was tabled by the commission at the meeting.

The commission voted, 6-4, to delay action on the permit requested by IESI Corp. of Fort Worth and scheduled a Dec. 18 "community meeting" to discuss the project proposed for 11 acres in an industrial park along Louisiana 25, just north of Hard Hat Drive.

The special session will be at 6 p.m. at the parish government complex on Koop Drive north of Mandeville.

"Shame on you," yelled some of the more than 100 opponents at Tuesday night's meeting. "How much did you get paid off," hollered another resident.

One opponent loudly clapped his hands in mock applause until a sheriff's deputy asked him to leave.

The delay and the community meeting were requested by IESI attorney Jeff Schoen, who said his client wants to hear comments from residents so their concerns can be addressed.

But Bruce Nesbitt of the North West St. Tammany Civic Association said residents want the commission to deny the permit. "The only meeting we're willing to have is for IESI to withdraw its request and discuss another use for the property," she said.

Residents contend the facility would amount to a dump near hundreds of homes and would be incompatible with the area.

The parish planning staff is recommending denial of the permit, noting that the site is within 900 feet of St. Gertrude subdivision. The station could present noise and odor problems for the surrounding area, the staff report said.

Schoen said the company disagrees with the staff report. And it would take more than the usual 10 minutes allotted to hear zoning cases to explain the project, he said. There's a need for the community meeting, Schoen said.

Commission member Ray "Bernie" Willie asked the panel to hear and decide the case Tuesday night. Bill Matthews, however, countered with a successful motion to table the matter.

Willie, Jay de la Houssaye, Karen Vander and Dale Mackie voted against tabling.

The schedule now calls for the commission to decide on the permit at its next regular meeting on Jan. 6.

The commission, two years and 10 months ago, approved and then later extended an almost identical conditional-use permit for the 10,500-square-foot facility. Those approvals were decided without opposition from nearby residents, who said they were unaware of the project.

Tuesday night, local residents -- who recently sued the parish and got the original permit voided in state district court -- turned out in force to oppose the new permit.

The original permit was issued to Southeast Investments, a company headed by Slidell businessman Chris Jean, in November 2006. Southeast Investments sold the 11-acre site for the transfer station to another company owned by Jean, which then sold the tract to IESI on Dec. 27, 2007, more than a month before the commission extended the permit on Feb. 6 of this year to Southeast Investments.

IESI also acquired a regional garbage company, Coastal Waste Services, from Jean and wants to build the transfer station for use by Coastal Waste garbage trucks serving western St. Tammany.

The civic association sued to stop the project in September after IESI began constructing the station. Construction came to a halt on Oct. 1 when state Judge Peter Garcia voided the zoning permit and parish building and operating permits.

The judge agreed with residents that the a condition placed on the permit -- a traffic study -- was illegally waived by the parish engineering department. The judge also ruled that the zoning permit was void because Southeast Investments no longer owned the 11-acre site when the commission granted the extension.

At a transfer station, garbage trucks would drive up a ramp inside a building to dump their loads onto larger trucks for disposal outside the parish. Officials with IESI contend that residents would not even know the facility is there.

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