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Tusten residents take fracking survey

By Guy Charles Harriton - reporter/photographer

NARROWSBURG — On a warm winter's day last Saturday, those travelling on Route 97 near Narrowsburg were met with a sign that says in no uncertain terms: "No Fracking."

But that may not necessarily be the consensus of the town.

People trickled into Tusten Town Hall to make their thoughts known about the controversial subject by filling out a survey under the conditions of anonymity.

This reporter took the test under the condition that the content of the survey was "off the record."

Mary Beth Egan, outreach coordinator for the New York University (NYU) School of Medicine, Department of Environmental Medicine, the lead agency, greeted everyone personally, offering homemade cakes and donuts and fielding any questions from participants.

Egan said, "We're very pleased with the turnout. It's 12:30 p.m. and we're hoping a lot more people come. We're excited that people are taking the time out of their day to fill out the survey."

By day's end, 79 had participated.

Maureen P. Sisco, M.A., Community Outreach and Engagement CORE associate at the department, said that NYU chose Tusten as the host town or "baseline study group."

Further, she explained, NYU has expanded its survey to towns outside of Tusten to "represent the southwest tier of Sullivan County."

In the survey, she explained, the participants' zip code becomes very important "so we can review the whole area and sort it out and pull Tusten."

Sisco said that NYU considered this the "first aspect."

She added, "The other aspect is that of the water. That's the scientific research and that polls town residents and certainly people who have their own wells. The water samples will be tested for certain metals that are found in fracking fluid — very specific metals."

There is a lot of speculation that fracking releases chemicals in well water. The reason NYU wants to test wells in Tusten is that nationwide there are wells that are already tainted with the methane. This sets off a red flag for potential oil companies to forgo those sites, according to Rob Jackson, a chemical engineer and ecologist from Duke University. He continues on his website, "There are methane trouble spots. Methane can be a natural seepage that was there before fracking."

Jackson states there is a need for baseline tests on water wells before drilling takes place.

Tusten Energy Committee President Brandi Merolla commented, "The committee (from NYU) was very patient and the residents took the survey very seriously."

Merolla was most impressed that the committee was "not political. They didn't come in with any kind of agenda. They were very clinical and were collecting data for baseline testing in a town that has not yet had fracking."

"There was no judging," she continued, "no right or wrong answers, but they wanted to hear from..."
people who are pro and con (fracking.)"
Her take on Governor Andrew Cuomo's lack of a decision on allowing fracking? "The shale has been there for two million years and he is taking a prudent approach."
Tusten has already made its point of view abundantly clear, she said, by the very fact that its town board passed a moratorium on fracking, adding that it "crosses party lines."
After taking the survey, resident Jill Weiner had this to say, "I thought the survey was important and I was happy that the town is doing such a survey. Any information on the subject of how people feel about fracking I think is important."