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Landfill hearing draws heat

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PORTAGE -- Tempers were heated at times and voices were raised when Northwest Indiana residents got the opportunity to ask state officials about waste management practices at ArcelorMittal Burns Harbor, lack of state enforcement and transparency Wednesday night.

A large part of the informational meeting and public hearing on ArcelorMittal's landfill application focused on a pile of waste dumped in the northeast corner of the site and dubbed "Easterly's pile" after the head of the state's environmental agency, the Indiana Department of Environmental Management. State officials previously denied that the pile would be landfilled, but said Wednesday that it would.

"Nothing's been said about the Easterly sludge sitting up on Lake Michigan, which is 200 feet from Lake Michigan. Nobody's ever addressed that," said Ogden Dunes resident Bob Hicks during a 40-minute question-and-answer session.

"I think (a company official) said 100 percent of this is recycled," said Jerry Rud, section chief of IDEM's Office of Land Quality.

"It wouldn't be there if that was the case," said ArcelorMittal Burns Harbor employee Larry Davis. "I'll take you by the hand and show you."

"I would like to go to the site," Rud said.

"I'd be better if you'd gone before the hearing," interjected Chesterton resident Mary Ann Crayton.

Rud said he and other IDEM staff looked at the northeast area on Google satellite maps.

"Right now, this is not a huge pile. ... It's really flat," he said. "To us it didn't look like a huge mountain. I haven't been there myself. I can't say for sure. In the media we were hearing pile, pile, pile."

Davis objected.

"It's a huge amount of waste there. It's not just a little bit as you're characterizing. My impression is what they've dumped for the last 40 years," he said.

Valparaiso environmental attorney Kim Ferraro indicated IDEM may not have enforced against the company for open dumping in the area because Commissioner Tom Easterly used to work at Bethlehem Steel, a predecessor to ArcelorMittal.

Rud did not comment.

"In my mind, we're trying to do the right thing in getting it into a landfill," he said. He said he was not aware of any sampling done recently on "Easterly's pile."

"The mill was in the process of trying to recycle some waste. ... It's not like they've just been stacking it up for 40 years. There was some (recycling). Some was taken off site to a landfill in Michigan."

William J. Tutlewski of Chesterton asked if any waste piles created in the northeast area after EPA tested there in 1999 have been tested.

"I don't think so. I'm not aware of that," Rud said.

Dale Heinz, senior division manager at ArcelorMittal Burns Harbor, testified that there has been "a great deal of misunderstanding in relation to the materials currently being staged for disposal" in the landfill. Some are now being recycled or landfilled elsewhere, he said. He said the company is building a landfill that's more protective of groundwater and the environment than required.

"We have proposed these efforts to satisfy concerns raised during our outreach," he said. Chesterton physician John Crayton raised questions about why IDEM hasn't enforced against the company earlier for its handling of the waste.

"It's very clear this new facility is a vast improvement over what was there before. That's good," he said. "But it also raises very serious questions about the mismanagement of these substances for the last 30 to 40 years."

Photo cutlines:

'I would like to go to the site': Jerry Rud, IDEM chief of Solid Waste Section, talks about a landfill permit application submitted by ArcelorMittal during a public hearing Wednesday. -- Michael McArdle/Post-Tribune

'A huge amount of waste': Larry Davis of Hebron called the landfill a "bad business decision" while commenting on the permit application Wednesday.