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Foster Township Group Irked Over Mee

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By JOHN HOINSKI
Staff Writer

SOUTHBOUNDER

Sharon Rohrbach, president Concerned Citizens of Foster Township, was optimistic last August after members of that group met with officials from the Environmental Protection Agency and American Telephone and Telegraph concerning the cleanup operations at the former C&D Recycling Plant.

In the four years prior to that, relations between the three was shaky at best. The CCFT accused the other two of lagging behind in sending pertinent information to the group; AT&T took exception to the negative comments; and the EPA said it would work on improving the lines of communication.

But, all of those problems seemed to be a thing of the past after the summer meeting, a session that prompted Rohrbach to remark, "I don't think I was ever as optimistic as I was after that meeting."

Those comments, apparently, are a thing of the past, too. At least for the moment.

Last week Rohrbach changed her tune, and this time says she would like some answers from AT&T on the latest skirmish that has cropped up. She has been having difficulty, however, in getting through to someone from that agency.

A meeting between the three had been tentatively scheduled for Thursday, or sometime within the week, but Rohrbach said she has learned that CCFT representatives will not be invited. That information, she said, came from the EPA, but added that no one from AT&T has contacted her about the latest development. The session, according to the EPA, is scheduled for Monday in Philadelphia.

"The meeting is still going to be held," Rohrbach explained. "They will be discussing the cleanup activity at the site. That is very important. I don't know why we will not be permitted to go. They won't even let our experts attend."

One reason may be because Rohrbach is one of several township residents who has filed a lawsuit against AT&T because of what has taken place at the Foster Township location.

C&D is the superfund site where concentrations of lead were found in 1984. Nassau Metals, a subsidiary of AT&T, had produced lead cables that were delivered to the site which were burned to reclaim the metal core. EPA is overseeing the project.

"I realize that AT&T might be a little uncomfortable discussing the project because of the lawsuit," Rohrbach said. "But I would be there only as a representative of the CCFT. Even if they don't want me to go, why won't they let our technical people attend?

"I can see if it was a staff meeting that they wouldn't want us there. If you had a staff meeting at the newspaper, I'm sure you wouldn't want an outsider sitting there listening to what was going on. It's just not right. But this isn't a staff meeting. There are going to be people from other agencies there," she added.

A week ago the CCFT received draft reports from the EPA which will essentially determine what will be done to clean up the area, but simply getting that information, Rohrbach said, was a difficult task. It was through the efforts of Lew Crampton of the EPA in Washington, Ed Shoener from the Wilkes-Barre DER and Congressman Paul Kanjorski that the CCFT got the report, according to Rohrbach.

She also praised the efforts of Al Peterson, the EPA representative who has been working with the C&D group, for his work.

"We are very grateful to these people for getting us the report, but it seems like we are right back where we started from," Rohrbach said. "AT&T is not any more cooperative than they were five years ago. It seems like they look upon us as adversaries, and that's not right. We are all working towards the same goal."

She said that the CCFT has 30 days to file questions with the EPA based on the draft reports, but Rohrbach said it would make much more sense to be a part of the proceedings.

"If we were actually there we could get a better feel of why something was put into a report. I would think AT&T would be happy to have us there," she stated.

"If you prepare a report based on the most accurate information possible, if you believe you have the best possible plan, then why would you object to somebody else looking at it? We have geologists, hydrogeologists and other professionals we hired who are very frustrated because they will not be invited to see what is going on," Rohrbach continued.

"The ironic part is the grant money we received that enables us to continue our work as a group comes from AT&T. But we keep spending funds fighting them for information. This is ridiculous."

Rohrbach believes that there are a lot of egos involved, and trying to

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satisfy everyone is difficult. She also said there are too many people involved in the C&D matter which results in much confusion.

"Lew Crampton and Al Peterson are working with us, they are trying to help. And Al has 25 other sites he has to work on. But somewhere in between there are other people involved who foul things up," she stated.

"There are people in our group who won't even attend meetings anymore. They say it is a waste of time because they get no satisfaction and they only become more frustrated. And they are right," Rohrbach added.

Peterson said the three groups are going to work more closely in the very near future, but that the CCFT group probably won't be invited to attend Monday's meeting.

"I'm 99.9 percent sure Sharon's group will not be invited," Peterson said from Chicago on Thursday. "But we, and I mean the EPA and AT&T, are working to break new ground with the CCFT group that hasn't been done anywhere in the country. They are the first to get these draft reports. We are looking at this Foster Township group as a model for other similar organizations throughout the country.

"The problem is because this is new ground there are channels that you have to go through, and unfortunately the meeting will probably be held before all of this is settled. But they will be involved in future meetings."

Peterson said that officials such as himself and Lydia Whitefield of AT&T are relatively new to the C&D problem and are in the process of getting together along with other officials to become more familiar with proceedings.

Peterson said he would also like to get together with the CCFT group, along with Whitefield, and that he would like to have some of the meetings take place in Foster Township rather than in Philadelphia all of the time.

Rohrbach stated that a spokesman from the EPA said three weeks ago that he was waiting to hear from officials from AT&T to release information on the new rapport that has been developed between the three groups.

"I was really looking forward to a positive, upbeat article being released," she stated. "There has been a lot of ill feelings between the CCFT, AT&T and the EPA over the years. And I thought that this article would be good for everyone; to show people we are making progress. I really felt good about this.

"We still want to have a good relationship. We are ready whenever they are."