

It's my opinion and I'm sticking to it

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Metro Editor

Sometimes, all I need is the air that I breathe.
- The Hollies

If you've visited Early County at any time in the last few years, you at least have a little understanding of why many of the people there are looking to the \$2 billion Lingle Energy Station as a potential answer to their prayers.

Abject poverty is rampant in this community, even with the efforts of people like native son Charles Rice and the very forward-thinking revitalization organization Early County 2055. Georgia Rural Development Council statistics indicate almost one in four individuals in the county lives below the poverty level.

During a recent visit to Blakely, Early's county seat, I talked with a number of residents about Lingle, and most of them said the coal-fired power plant could be the best thing that ever happened to the community. The comments of many seemed to contain as much wishful thinking as they did conviction.

I asked each person I talked with about the potential environmental dangers of the plant, if they were concerned about global warming, and many looked at me as if I'd asked them about the possibility of Godzilla rising out of the Flint River and attacking their quaint community.

"All I know is that there are supposed to be a lot of jobs - high-paying jobs - at that plant," one person said. "That right there is good enough for me."

I've talked with a number of people about the Lingle plant since my visit to Blakely. I've read as much as I could find about similar plants and their impact - both economic and environmental - on the areas in which they're located.

Based on the information I've gathered, I'm inclined to question the wisdom of the Georgia Supreme Court's decision last week not to hear an appeal of a permit granted New Jersey-based LS Power that would allow the company to begin construction of the 1,200-megawatt energy station.

My initial question centers on the need for such a facility, which could, according to officials, provide electricity for "up to a million homes." Certainly the energy needs of the region will grow in the coming years, but will that growth be enough to warrant construction of the 11th coal-burning power plant in the state?

I haven't seen evidence that indicates there will be a dire need.

But my primary concern is the one that groups like the Flint Riverkeepers, Environment Georgia, the Sierra Club of Georgia, Friends of the Chattahoochee, the Fall-Line Alliance for a Clean Environment, the Georgia Wildlife Federation, the Georgia Center for Law in the Public Interest and others have expressed: the pollution that will spew from the plant.

Opponents of the Lingle plant point to high levels of carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide, lead, mercury and other particulate matter that will enter the surrounding environment from the plant each day as byproducts of the burning of coal to produce energy. Those elements, they say, will lead to dramatic increases in cancer and cardiovascular diseases among residents in the area and will foul the already polluted air in Southwest Georgia, southeast Alabama and the panhandle of north Florida.

Wildlife in the Flint and Chattahoochee rivers, as well as on land surrounding the plant, would be adversely affected by the plant's pollutants, detractors say.

One question, it seems, must be asked and answered before any work starts on the plant: Do the dangers outweigh the benefits?

Supporters of the plant applaud ludicrous "cap and trade" legislation that would, essentially, impose levels on the pollution that is allowable at such facilities, but provide an escape for millionaire and billionaire plant owners by allowing them to buy or trade for additional levels ... otherwise known as the rich-folks' payoff.

When I expressed my concerns over construction of the Lingle plant in Early County to a group in the community, some offered a little friendly advice: "We're the ones trying to find ways to make a living over here. Why don't you folks who don't live here mind your own business?"

They offered no comeback, however, when I pointed out that living just a few miles away from the proposed plant site and therefore likely to subject my family to the pollution that the plant would produce, this issue damned sure is my business.

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