

Safety concerns key issue for residents at Tuesday public meeting on medical waste treatment facility in Spartanburg

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An attorney, an official from a sensible growth advocacy group and a few community residents who gathered at Broome High School on Tuesday evening for a public meeting on a proposed medical waste treatment facility voiced concerns that the safety of the technology that would be used there is unproven.

Spartanburg attorney Gary Poliakoff, citing TreatMed's draft permit from the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control to open a facility on Franke Drive in Spartanburg County, told a group of about 40 people that there are too many unanswered questions to allow the company to have a permit that would be effective for a decade.

Poliakoff said a group of area residents asked him to look into the company's proposal.

TreatMed's sister company, ECODAS, which builds the machines that TreatMed proposes to use to sterilize medical waste, has machines in use in 60 countries, according to company officials.

But TreatMed does not have a facility in the U.S., and ECODAS technology has not yet been used in this country.

TreatMed wants to win DHEC's approval to open a waste treatment facility on Franke Drive, about a mile from the Cannon's Campground community where many families blame previous chemical dumping by another company for dozens of cancer cases.

"What's being proposed here is to bring in all this infectious waste by a company with no apparent track record," Poliakoff said of TreatMed's proposal.

The then-mayor and city council in Fairburn, Ga., rejected

TreatMed's proposal to open a facility there in 2009.

Poliakoff added that TreatMed has so far not addressed a number of safety questions relating to possible exposure points during the handling of medical waste.

The attorney said allowing TreatMed to open the facility will negatively affect quality of life and property values in the community.

DHEC officials said TreatMed would have to pass the state agency's tests before starting operations, and company officials said this layer of scrutiny should be enough to ease community concerns.

Susan Jenkins, manager of DHEC's Infectious Waste Program, said the agency has three staff members dedicated to inspecting waste treatment facilities in South Carolina.

She said DHEC inspects large quantity facilities like the one TreatMed wants to open about once every two years.

If approved, the DHEC permit will allow the company to store and treat infectious medical waste that will be shredded and sterilized using pressurized steam.

According to DHEC and TreatMed, the process uses no chemicals or burning, and the water used in the process will be sterilized before disposal.

Jenkins said the technology, known as autoclave, is a generally accepted method in the scientific community of sterilizing surgical tools and infectious waste.

She said the permit TreatMed is seeking would not allow the company to accept radioactive or chemical waste.

DHEC is slated to approve TreatMed's permit for the Franke Drive facility unless concerns based on technical, scientific evidence are raised, or Spartanburg County Council refuses to grant the company a zoning permit.

DHEC officials attending Tuesday night's meeting encouraged concerned community members to get in touch with their council members.

Shelley Robbins, project coordinator for the regional environmental and sensible growth promoting group Upstate

Forever, pointed out that another company that collects and transports medical waste is already in business on Franke Drive.

"In this community, we have a grouping of hazardous waste treatment facilities, and I don't think it's fair to the community," she said. "This community is handling more than its fair share."

Robbins said that DHEC does not have sufficient staff to inspect and enforce regulations at facilities like the one proposed by TreatMed.

Another woman who did not identify herself said the area should not be a "guinea pig" for a new waste treatment operation.

TreatMed President David Squalli has said the project is environmentally friendly and represents an investment in the community.

He has said the company, which is not seeking local tax incentives, plans to invest about \$4 million in the plant during a three-year period and initially hire about 15 employees.

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