

What Is to Become of Us in the Era of the Gas Boom?

First of all, I'm certainly not an expert in the pros and cons of what is to become perhaps on of the largest segments of our economy in this region.

I am an observer though, and see time and place swiftly overtaking us. I am involved in this both as a landowner, having leased my small acreage and considered members of the Gas drilling community in the rental of a home we own as well as my inclination, experience, and education in environment and law.

First some history concerning my experiences here in Tioga County. We came here in the early 70s and build our own home from timber and stones on our property and raised our kids here.

Whether you were raised here or arrived here at some point, many of us came here and/or are here for a reason ...Quality of Life. It is that simple (we are usually not here for the money, right?). We have been able to live here on our own land, raise our children, and maintain our own little space in a forest with clean air, water, and decent people around us in a small, rural community. That is no small thing these days. In fact, it is a very large thing.

In the fall of 1990 I became the Tioga County Planner. One of my first jobs was to become very familiar with the County and State regulations which governed planning here. To do this I went hunting for the County and Municipal ordinances that would apply. I found very few...and most of those I found (including the Tioga County Subdivision Ordinance) were antiquated and would not really be valid in a court of law.

Several years later, with the help of a great group of volunteers on a planning commission, we had a new Tioga County Subdivision and Land Development Ordinance. In those days there was not a hint of wind power and certainly not gas drilling in the Marcellus Shale. They were not written into the ordinance. There was only subdivision and land development. Large industrial pig barns had not even come on the scene at that point. The point is...we did not know these things were coming, but here they are.

Anyway, over the years, many municipalities came to me with requests that subdivision and/or land development ordinances did not cover. Most of these requests were zoning in nature. In other words, basically regulating what folks could do with their land instead of how they could do it (as in subdivision and land development).

As some of you may be aware, we attempted to bring County Zoning to Tioga County over the past few years and were unsuccessful. In the end, developmental interests as well as a dose of McCarthyism playing on irrational fear were instrumental in stopping that. By the way, that would have helped to regulate gas drilling in some locations in the county.

Effectively, then, there are no local legal stops on this. But one might ask: why would we want legal stops on this? It is bringing large amounts of money to many segments of our local economy at a time when that economy is down. It is helping dairy farmers and other large land owners do more than survive in some cases. In fact, it has already turned some large acreage landowners into fairly wealthy people. And...it will

probably do that for quite a few more folks as well as bringing dollars to other parts of our economy as that money trickles down. What's wrong with that? The short answer is "nothing."

The key word in the previous paragraph is "stops." This is the fear of many...The fear of "stopping" the gas drilling and of course the real reason...the money flowing because of the gas drilling.

Many years ago my father-in-law, Corky Miles, who was a federal forester working out of Coudersport and a great guy (and really a second father to me), said something I will never forget. It was, "You know Kerry, during the great depression the old oil well country up there in Potter and many of the other Counties of north western and north central Pa. had a cushion others didn't. It was oil."

From some of the Gas drilling folks I meet as they come to look at our home to rent (we've gotten calls from Texas and other places southwest), I hear a very similar refrain. It is, "New York regulated us and we pulled out." Really, New York put a moratorium on drilling until the State could get their act together. At some point there will be drilling in New York since the Marcellus Shale is there also. It is more a question of when and how.

The Department of Environmental Protection (think about what that name implies) has had its budget...and as a result, its regulatory staff cut and...they were ill-equipped to deal with this before the staff cut.

Many years ago, just after we came to the Morris area and built a home back in the woods, I ran a trapline on Babbs Creek up in the Landrus area. I was trying to catch coon and had no luck...until I realized that there were no crayfish (or much else) in that mine acid polluted stream. I caught trout in that stream last spring! It took over 100 years to force a recovery of that beautiful valley! Tioga County was basically raped in the late 1800s and early 1900s by mining interests. Ask the folks in Hamilton Township about that some time. There are still areas of our county and our region that have not recovered from that. What if our water was not usable to us? How would that affect our lives and our land? As in many other areas of the country, it happened and people didn't get it until it was too late. It is still happening in places like West Virginia with mountain top mining removal.

Back to that word "Stops". Does anyone seriously think that energy will not be a highly sought after commodity here even with a more careful consideration and perhaps slower exploitation of that resource?

Many of these folks that I meet from the Gas Industry are pretty decent folks. Some are from rural parts of the south and southwest and enjoy living in rural areas...but this is not their home. Most of them are here for a limited period of time and most of them are thankful to have a job. Most will do what their company wishes of them. Some of these companies will do things right...and some will not. Have we learned nothing from the recent greed of the financial crisis? Have we learned nothing from our own history?

Development of the gas resource which is pretty sure to come is, rationally speaking, not going to be stopped, but it should be regulated sufficiently to insure that drillers do it right...and if there are problems, that they are dealt with effectively. To do that, it must be slowed down to the extent that it can be done safely for all.

How will that happen in the present economic climate when Pennsylvania does not have the funds to do it right? Well...it must be taxed at least enough to insure that our very land and lives are not degraded. And those taxes must be used specifically to regulate it. It should be a bipartisan thing, not a for or against thing for either party. Rationally speaking, that must happen also.