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Environmentalists, union at odds over coal plant in Linden

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A coalition of environmentalists tried Thursday to announce the formation of an alliance to fight a proposed coal degasification plant in Linden which next week will face the first major hurdle toward being built.

But much of their message was drowned out by both the rain and about 25 members of Steamfitters Local 475 who loudly chanted "We need jobs" while also arguing the plant will be safe.

During a news conference that started at the steps of Linden City Hall and moved across the street to the sheltered Raymond Wood Bauer Promenade, Linden Council President Robert Bunk joined the Arthur Kill Watershed Alliance, a coalition of members from six environmental organizations, to voice his opposition to the proposal by PurGen to build a coal degasification plant on former DuPont property.

Bunk expressed concerns that the \$5 billion carbon capture and sequestration pilot project will threaten the health of city residents and the environment. He said there are too many unanswered questions about the "experimental" technology.

"I cannot in good faith support the Pur Gen coal degasification project. I must waver on the side of the residents of Linden," Bunk said.

On Tuesday, Oct. 20, City Council members will decide whether to approve a memorandum of understanding with DuPont to open up the 98-acre waterfront industrial property for redevelopment with PurGen or anyone else, according to Mayor Richard Gerbounka. Approval of that memorandum would be the first step toward building the plant.

The memorandum also will end litigation between the city and DuPont that started in 2003 under a prior administration when the property was promised to another developer after the city designated the tract as an "area in need of redevelopment."

"The environmentalists don't have the facts of the process and they use that misrepresentation to scare the public into a doomsday scenario," said Gerbounka, who said it's better left to the experts at the different environmental agencies that will review the plan to decide if the process is safe.

PurGen based in Massachusetts has proposed building a plant that heats coal under pressure to create electricity. Coal would be shipped to Linden by barge and rail.

The gasification process to produce electricity would create carbon dioxide. To address that, the company plans to build a pipeline 70 miles long or more, out into the ocean, injecting the carbon dioxide beneath deep ocean sediment. Pressure from the ocean waters is expected to prevent the

gas from escaping the bed rock.

Michael Mulvaney, business manager of Steamfitters Local 475, said the technology is not experimental but is currently used in the North Sea.

"This project is based on sound science," said Mulvaney, adding the project would also bring about 2,500 jobs, employment needed by his members, 35 percent of which are currently out of work.

Supporters have touted the project as a "clean coal" plant.

"There is no such thing as clean coal," said David Pringle of the New Jersey Environmental Federation. "You can put lipstick on coal, but it's still dirty coal."

Jeff Tittel, New Jersey Sierra Club director said the plant is a \$5 billion environmental Ponzi scheme that not only won't work but will lead to environmental disaster.

City resident Beatrice Bernzott of the Tremley Point Alliance said residents in the industrial Tremley Point section of the city have successfully fought off plans for a garbage incinerator, hazardous waste incinerator, and race track.

"I live at ground zero. We've had explosions and fire. This is about people not jobs. The bottom line is that all that pollution is in the landfill of our lungs," she said.
