

Officials fear housing crisis

Drilling boom could cause shortage

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BATH | Future natural gas drilling in Steuben County could create a housing crisis in the county, according to local experts.

County legislators recently requested federal and state help in dealing with a possible housing shortage if an anticipated boom in natural gas drilling materializes once the state approves a new drilling method, called hydrofracking.

A moratorium on hydrofracking now exists through May while the state draws up guidelines to ensure drilling will be safe and not contaminate water sources.

It's believed a large number of out-of-state industry workers will flock to the area to mine natural gas in the Marcellus Shale formation, which lies deep beneath Steuben, Chemung and other counties in the Southern Tier. The natural gas rich formation also lies in

Pennsylvania, West Virginia and parts of Ohio and the Appalachian Basin.

The county Legislature's request follows the recommendations of members of the county's Marcellus Shale Task Force. The group was formed last summer to look at the wide-ranging effects that expanded gas drilling will have on county services.

"One of the things we've learned from other states is that housing can be a real problem," said county Department of Social Services Commissioner Kathryn Muller.

A number of drillers in central Pennsylvania have already moved into hotels and motels in the Lindley-Corning area, she said.

While well-paying tenants may be an incentive for landlords to raise the rent, the likely result will be an increase in evictions and homelessness in a county in a county where homelessness has doubled since January,

Muller said.

On average, 135 individuals and families now rely on DSS for help every month, she said.

The type of homelessness ranges from families forced to leave to overcrowded homes to people sleeping in their cars, she said.

Anyone who applies to DSS is put in temporary quarters, such as motel rooms, until a solution can be found, Muller said.

Compounding the problem is the sluggish county economy, which could lead to more families needing help in the coming year, she said.

The recent extension of federal unemployment benefits will affect 1,100 workers in January, with another extension benefiting 2,000 employees in May.

"I don't know what we would do without that," Muller said.

The so-called working poor – families working several jobs and earning

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just above the poverty line – are even more of a concern, county Administrator Mark Alger said.

"That group is going to have their rents go up and not be able to get into other apartments," Alger said. "Placing them in (affordable) housing is going to be very difficult."

County officials have warned for years about a chronic shortage of safe housing in Steuben.

That problem is likely to get worse as gas workers move in. The lack of zoning in a number of small towns also could lead to trailer parks sprouting up with minimal code requirements, according to the county task force's sub-committee on housing.

One unanswered question is the length of time workers will remain in the area, according to Dan Gallagher, of Arbor Development, a non-profit agency that renovates or builds affordable housing units throughout the region.

The uncertain length

of stay means plans must be drawn up for permanent housing and for rental properties for short-term residents, he said.

"We have to provide for a mixture," Gallagher said.

One way municipalities can deal with the mix and make sure every county resident has a home is to implement "inclusive zoning," which pair high- and moderate-cost home construction with affordable units, Gallagher said.

But in many cases in Steuben, existing housing is really "rotten, really lousy," he said.

Alger said the county has about a year to plan ways to ease the predicted housing problem, and is looking for help from state and federal housing programs.

"We wanted to raise an issue of concern it will take some time to get answers to," he said.

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