

House abandoned because of compressor station; Family walks away from \$250,000

The River Reporter

By JESSICA COHEN
November 24, 2015 —

MINISINK, NY — In June, Leanne and Rob Baum and their four children abandoned their house in Minisink, leaving it to the bank holding the mortgage and oversight by a friend. Ominous symptoms from emissions of a 12,600 horsepower gas compressor built in their rural neighborhood two years before by Millennium Pipeline, LLC, prompted their decision, said Leanne. After it had been six months on the market they had no offers on their house, and selling to another family felt morally questionable.

“Once you know, you can’t un-know about the hazards,” she said. “I hoped no one would be interested.”

No one was, and others in the neighborhood negotiated with “lowball offers” to sell their houses in the once-quiet rural community after they had been a year on the market, Baum said.

The Baums had bought their four-bedroom house for \$374,000, and invested about \$250,000 in payments and improvements during their nine years there. In addition to putting in hardwood floors, lighting upgrades, a family room, wood stove and patio, they had landscaped two acres. Their apple, cherry and peach trees, gardens and greenhouse yielded produce they ate, preserved and gave away to friends. They sold raspberry jam at a farmers’ market and drank wine made from grapes they grew.

But in those last two years, they lost interest in gardening. Rob had begun waking up with headaches that went away when he arrived at work, though his office was dusty, low-ceilinged and lit by fluorescent lights, said Leanne. Her eyes became too irritated to tolerate contact lenses, and she noticed her children had become “lethargic.” Although they were accustomed to playing imaginary games outside, where they had a tree house and trampoline, the Baums began to wonder if that was a good idea, with the toxic emissions from the compressor.

“OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] regulations for the workplace are more stringent than for compressors,” said Leanne. “And that’s for a six-foot male, not for kids, whose metabolisms are faster.”

Even some of the Baum’s fruit trees looked sickly, as environmental health consultant David Brown noticed when he visited, while doing a health survey of 35 residents living within 1.5 kilometers of the compressor. Brown, former Chief of Environmental Epidemiology and Occupational Health in Connecticut, and his cohorts at Southwest Pennsylvania Environmental Health Project (SPEHP), found that residents exhibited a pattern of symptoms that increased when emissions surged in the neighborhood, as measured by particulate matter monitors and air samples during “odor events.”

The compressor tripled ambient levels of fine particulate matter, which produces inflammation throughout the body and increases the likelihood of heart attacks and other ailments, according to Harvard environmental epidemiologist Joel Schwartz. Volatile organic chemical emissions that SPEHP identified included formaldehyde and benzene, which are considered unsafe at any level and associated with childhood leukemia by the World Health Organization.

Rob was one of 12 of the 35 in the survey who developed headaches after the compressor began functioning. A Baum child was one of 10 who had rashes. Respiratory problems affected 22 people—six of the 12 surveyed children had nosebleeds; at least two adults became asthmatic. And, consistent with what the Baums noticed in their children, “Overall mental health and wellbeing levels were below normal for half of the respondents,” according to the survey summary.

These results echoed findings around the country near other gas infrastructure, including drilling sites. Wilma Subra, an environmental health consultant who received a MacArthur Fellowship “genius” grant for her community work, found that 90% of people living and working within two to three miles of a compressor develop such symptoms. Resulting chronic problems included organ damage, birth defects and leukemia. Two hundred homes are within a half mile of the Minisink compressor. A plan by Competitive Power Ventures, LLC, to build a gas power plant a few miles away, in Wawayanda, would increase compressor use and would generate the same emissions as the compressor but in multiple amounts. For people living within a few miles of a power plant, adverse health effects are intensified, says Subra.

The Baums had been in the habit of opening their windows at night, but Brown said, “You don’t want to do that,” Leanne recalls. “It sent a chill through me.”

Safety issues also loomed. Fumes near the compressor prompted a neighbor to call 911 on a Sunday night when Leanne was home alone with her baby.

“When emergency responders got to the compressor, they couldn’t get beyond the locked gate,” she recalled. “What was I supposed to do? Stay? Leave?”

Columbia Pipeline Group (CPG), Millennium’s parent company, monitors the compressor remotely from Charleston, WV, according to Scott Castleman, CPG senior communications specialist. CPG officials declined to provide information about on -staffing hours.

By the time health survey results came out early in 2015, the Baums, collaborating with other Minisink residents, had lost their federal court case against Millennium and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC), which had approved the compressor. It could have been built in an industrially zoned area in Deerpark, where Millennium already had facilities; they were just avoiding costly replacement of seven miles of pipeline, the Minisink group said. Also, the compressor application’s environmental impact statement omitted mentioning plans for a Wawayanda power plant, secretly documented years before.

“The gas industry and FERC refer to Minisink as a host community, but we are not hosts. We are hostages,” said Pramilla Malick, a Minisink resident and founder of Protect Orange County. “FERC’s decision in the Minisink case raises serious questions about the constitutionality of the permitting process. Millennium admitted they had a viable alternative, but rejected it based on economics. If they had a viable alternative, then why was the Minisink compressor declared a ‘public necessity’? And why are the financial interests of a billion dollar company more important than the basic rights of ordinary citizens? Given the magnitude of the CPV Valley project, adverse health and economic impacts will continue to increase throughout the region.”

She points out that building power plants creates a need for constructing other gas infrastructure, including pipelines and metering stations, as well as compressors, all of which have problematic health effects from emissions and leaks, Subra found.

However, the FERC has continued issuing permits without apparent regard for these concerns. So, for five days, Malick participated in an 18-day hunger strike in front of FERC offices in Washington, DC, with Beyond Extreme Energy, a national group demanding a stop to fossil fuel infrastructure permitting.

Health professionals are also joining the gas opposition. In October, members of Physicians for Social Responsibility and Concerned Health Professionals of New York sent a letter to New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo requesting a moratorium on gas infrastructure construction because of public health problems from toxic emissions.

The Baums and other Minisink residents fought the compressor for two years before its construction, when Farmstead Land Development LLC, whose principal is Dean Ford Sr., sold Millennium the land, contingent on local and federal approvals. Ford blamed the sale on hard times for farmers, Leanne said.

“It was the last large farm in the area,” she said. “If he’d come to the neighbors, we could have made the land a park, and he would have been a hero.” She feels that both local and federal officials failed the community.

“We thought, how can they be so blind? But the government says industry must survive. Get out of the way. The federal decision was the hardest. Where do we go from here? We were bogged down by the house and mortgage. You can’t just walk away, can you? But we started taking the house apart, downsizing, giving away furniture. We packed like we were moving, with no destination in mind. It was kind of bizarre. We stopped paying the mortgage and decided we’d step away at some point.”

When Brown explained the health survey results that was the “catalyst,” said Baum. “Would I be taking one of my children for chemotherapy in 15 years because we’d stayed too long?”

The Baums had visited friends in the Midwest over the winter, and their friends connected Rob with a job possibility. Early in 2015 he received an offer and decided to take it. He would be shifting from a white collar job as corporate buyer for an outdoor equipment company to a blue collar job digging water wells.

“My husband is a Renaissance man who does what he puts his mind to. Now he comes home dirty,” said Leanne.

The Baums are working with the bank to get a “deed in lieu of foreclosure.”

“We didn’t just drop the keys on the doorstep,” says Leann. “But our credit is severely damaged.”

They now live in a rented house in a Midwestern city.

“People say to us, ‘You uprooted your family to start a new job. What made you do that? We sit them down and explain,’” says Leann. “On the street downtown, we see people walk past petitions to stop fracking. It’s not on their radar.”

Retrieved on April 18, 2016 from:

<http://www.riverreporter.com/news/4302/2015/11/24/house-abandoned-because-compressor-station-family-walks-away-250000>