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Group upset with regulators over Pinova site

By TERRY DICKSON terrydickson50@gmail.com

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Pastor Martae Smith of Zion Rock Baptist Church smiles wryly after Jim McNamara, head of the Land Protection Branch of the Georgia Environmental Protection Division, answers a question in a zoom conference hosted by the Environmental Safety Collaborative.

Terry Dickson/The Brunswick News

Members of the Environmental Safety Collaborative tried to hold a state environmental regulator's feet to the fire over his handling of the ongoing dismantling of Pinova, the chemical facility shut down after catching fire in April.

Jim McNamara, head of the Land Protection Branch of the Georgia Environmental Protection Division, was frustrated by the questions asked via a teleconference. Members of the collaborative were equally frustrated over his answers.

The collaborative sponsored “The Community First Summit,” a nearly all day session at the University of Georgia Marine Extension Service billed as the reuse of the Pinova site that was formerly operated by Hercules. The questioning of McNamara ran into overtime.



Speaking from Atlanta, McNamara assured his questioners he was doing all he could under his jurisdiction.

“Have y’all been at the plant site since they announced they weren’t going to reopen?” Glynn County Commissioner Allen Booker asked.

“I’m going to have to say no,” McNamara said, because the fire marshal initially blocked off the area and once the fire marshal was done, insurance adjusters kept it closed.

It was noted that Pinova has announced that 99% of the clean-out was complete, including emptying tanks, warehouses and supplies, and cleaning residuals from tanks and pipelines.

Booker and five pastors repeatedly asked why the EPD hadn’t monitored the process, but McNamara said he had jurisdiction only if a substance was released to the ground and some remedial action was necessary.

“I’m not a cop. I can’t go up there and wave a badge around and say, ‘Tell me everything you’re doing or I’m going to throw you in jail;’” McNamara said.

McNamara said even though the collaborative may not like what he’s doing, “I’m doing what I can.”

McNamara noted that he has worked on the cleanup of the LCP Georgia Superfund site for three decades and noted it has been hard to get some things done.

“I’ve been tilting at windmills for quite some time,” he said. “What you’re asking for me to do, I can’t do.”



He said he can go onto the plant site when there are activities regulated under the law.

McNamara told the collaborative that the branch deals mostly with shipping records such as bills of lading on materials moved off the site or of records of materials being placed in a drum for recycling.

Apparently not satisfied with McNamara’s answers, the panel asked “Why aren’t you on the site face-to-face overseeing the dismantling?”

Although he continued to answer some questions, the obviously exasperated McNamara refused to answer the same questions repeatedly.

He said the dismantling of Pinova’s above ground structures will be complete by the end of 2024. It was to have been done earlier but there were some issues with contractors, he said.

Pinova is actively dismantling lab chemicals, samples and maintenance materials, removing equipment, removing fluorescent bulbs and batteries, removing asbestos and other hazards, as well as decontaminating work areas.

The foundations of structures will be left in case they are of use to future occupants of the grounds.

Rachael Thompson, executive director of the Glynn Environmental Coalition, gave the group an update of EPA Superfund sites and state-regulated hazardous waste sites, including some that have been delisted.

She noted that there are plans to build residential housing on property adjacent to the Hercules 009 Superfund site, a former landfill that has been capped and where Nalley Honda parks vehicles. Thompson said the wooded area is bordered by Merchants Way.

The site has benzene 20 to 30 feet below the surface. Hercules must ensure the chemical isn't vaporizing and going to the surface before the site can be developed, she said.

The collaborative was also expected to hear presentations on ways to reuse the site before adjourning.



Terry Dickson