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Our nuclear neighbor: INDIAN POINT

Demonstrators from both sides pack Indian Point hearing

By ROGER WITHERSPOON
THE JOURNAL NEWS
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WHITE PLAINS — Hundreds of chanting, shouting residents packed a Westchester County legislative hearing on the future of Indian Point last night to either demand an end to the nuclear plants or urge support for their continued operation.

The dueling demonstrations pitted about 400 union workers from the two nuclear plants in Buchanan, who came from the plant in four buses, against an equal number of members of the Indian Point Safe Energy Coalition.

Before the 7 p.m. hearing, both groups massed on separate corners in front of the Westchester County Center, waving signs and chanting slogans. But as the hearing approached, the members of Local 1-2 of the Utility Workers union moved en masse to the center's Little Theater, which had seating for only 425. At that point, about 100 members of the anti-Indian Point coalition were already inside, seated in the front of the hearing room, and the union members packed the rest.

The majority of the coalition members, therefore, found themselves locked out of the hearing room and forced to mill in the building lobby. This triggered dueling demonstrations inside and outside of the hearing room.

In the lobby, the 300 or so anti-Indian Point members shouted, "Shut it down! Shut it down!" In the back of the lobby, the smaller number of union workers, prompted by a cheerleading union leader, Mark Williams, shouted the answering cry of "Keep it open! Keep it open!"

Though boisterous, the rivalry was civil, and police watched from a distance.

Inside the hearing room, where the union workers had the majority, speakers who favored the plants were greeted with cheers and thunderous ovations while those adults who favored shutting it down drew boos.

The evening hearing was the second contentious public forum held by the Westchester County Board of Legislators' Environment and Public Safety Committee on resolutions to decommission Indian Point's nuclear plants and have an independent review of the emergency evacuation plan for Westchester, Rockland, Putnam and Orange counties.

Environment committee Chairman Michael Kaplowitz, D-Somers, said another hearing would be held in larger quarters to ensure everyone gets a chance to discuss the issues.

"We're here to listen," Kaplowitz said. "It is not easy to discuss Indian Point, for there are 1,500 people who work there and have hopes and plans and dreams which are at stake. But there are overriding public safety issues which, in my view, means we have to find a way to close the plant and find replacement job opportunities for them."

Greg Garvey, 15, of Valhalla High School drew cheers from the union workers when he said, "There is nothing to be afraid of at Indian Point. Nothing's going to happen."

Coalition members cheered 16-year-old Jeremy Syrop of Chappaqua, who countered that, "Indian Point threatens all of our lives. I don't want to die, and I don't want anyone here to die."

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Among the adults, Alex Matthiessen, head of the environmental group Riverkeeper, said, "We have no doubt you are doing all you can to ensure that Indian Point is run safely. But the threat of terrorism is real. Indian Point is vulnerable, and you cannot protect that plant."

But Indian Point 2 engineer Dragos Nuta countered that, "If the terrorists fly around again, the safest place in the United States is in that containment building."

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