

Aries hosts public forum on sludge plant

Event gives company and opposition chance to grow their support
Daniel Schemer

The Taunton Daily Gazette | USA TODAY NETWORK TAUNTON — With the proposal to build a biosolids gasification facility in the city gaining more attention, Aries Clean Technologies hosted its first open public forum this past Thursday, March 24, inside the gymnasium of the Bristol Community College center in Taunton, on 2 Hamilton St.



Resident Dave Prado, right, engages in a spirited conversation with Aries Project Director Mark Lyons, left.

A sizable amount of Tauntonians, ranging from the curious and indecisive, to supporters of the project, to the fervently opposed, stopped by the science fair-like setup of tables and poster boards laid out for the forum to put some faces to the name and learn more about the city’s proposed solution to solve its human waste issues.

David Pottier, city councilor and one of numerous city officials at the forum, explained he voted for the Host Community Agreement with Aries in February 2021 because he wanted to keep the process going and give time for further data and analysis from the state to come in. “I’m in favor of the concept. My biggest concern is the actual science. If it’s viable, then I’m all for it,” he said.

Mark Lyons, director of business development – New England, said this forum, intended to educate the public on the project, is a requirement as part of Aries’ current evaluation period with the Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act Office (MEPA). Lyons stated he plans on hosting more of these events in the future.



Members of Clean Air Taunton, center, speak with attendees opposing Aries, including Dave Prado, right. PHOTOS BY DANIEL SCHEMER/THE TAUNTON DAILY GAZETTE

Present at the forum to answer questions was numerous staff from Epsilon Associates, Inc., who's been contracted by Aries as consultants for assisting the project through the lengthy approval and permitting processes with the city and state.

'A new technology'

Aries' proposed facility, to be located at Taunton's landfill, would convert the city and region's sewer waste into biochar, to be sold to the concrete industry. As explained at the forum by Joel Thornton, business development manager for Aries, biochar has become a sought-after binding agent for concrete due to it being a viable substitute to fly ash, a byproduct from coal-fired power plants that's becoming scarcer to obtain due to coal's use dwindling over the years.

Gasification and waste-to-energy production aren't new systems. Joe Sabato, senior consultant of Epsilon, explained that using this process to apply to human sludge is "a new technology," with one of the only examples being a pilot project in Australia. The only other facility utilizing Aries' patented technology for gasifying biosolids, located in Linden, New Jersey, is brand new and, according to Lyons, is scheduled to be fully operational for commercial production in a matter of weeks. Sabato emphasizes that current scientific data for the Taunton project, as explained in the company's Draft Environmental Impact Report, currently under review by MEPA, is sound.

However, Sabato also stated that all eyes will be on Aries' new facility in Linden, New Jersey, for fresh data regarding daily mechanical operations and emissions. "We think what we have developed is a conservative analysis. The data from Linden will help verify that," he said.

Critics worry of public health impact

Worry continues to grow, on public and legislative levels, for PFAS chemicals, often referred to as "forever" chemicals. These toxic chemicals are found in hundreds of consumer products, as well as human sludge, don't break down, and have been linked to a variety of illnesses. Though Aries has stated their process destroys 99% of the PFAS in biosolids, critics are worried about the emissions that would be coming from this gasification facility.

There wasn't any overt or grand expression of opposition to the project inside the forum.

Outside, in the parking lot to Bristol Community College Taunton, several members of advocacy group Clean Air Taunton were talking to visitors and handing out flyers for their cause.

Inside the forum, there were still skeptics. City Council President Phillip Duarte was one of two councilors who voted against the Host Community Agreement with Aries. He stated his reason stemmed from a letter from the Conservation Law Foundation that addressed concerns the group had over potential impacts to public health. "When you get contrary information, you want to put the brakes on to decide what is the best thing to do," said Duarte.

Duarte stated his views on the project haven't changed. He's lobbying for City Council to approve the hiring of an independent peer consultant to review Aries' Environmental Impact Report. "They say it will be evaluated by MEPA and DEP. I wouldn't put my trust in them to stop a bad project. There are examples of projects that have gone forward that are harmful to the communities they're in," said Duarte.

'They don't have facts'

Taunton resident David Prado got into a spirited argument with Mark Lyons when he confronted him. "If it were proven tech that's been around for 20 years, and if the federal government had more information on it, then at least we would have some facts. They don't have facts. There's nothing to go by," he said.

Prado said he found out Lyons is from Maine. He told he's worried about PFAS emissions from the facility and so brought up to Lyons a recent news story out about how biosolids had been used at farms in Maine as fertilizer for years, and, only just recently, they discovered high levels of PFAS chemicals contaminating crops, livestock, nearby water sources, and anyone who's consumed food originating from here.

Said Prado: "And now it's in a city of 55,000 people. I'm a mechanic. Things break down. There's going to be a learning process and people are going to pay for it."

Just as Aries was educating and swaying the public for their project inside, so were their opposition doing the same outside.

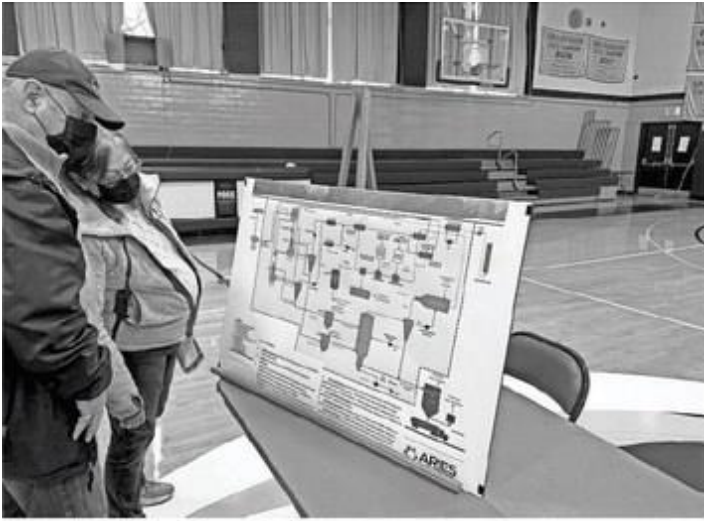
As he was leaving, Prado met members of Clean Air Taunton for the first time. After talking with the group, Prado said he was interested in their meetings and agreed to take bundles of their flyers to hand out.

City promised millions in revenue

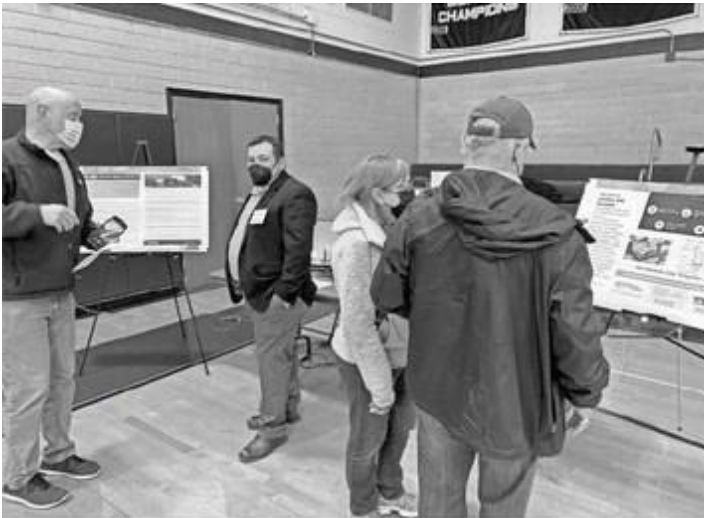
Aries has promised the gasification plant will net the city millions of dollars in revenue and savings a year, while also yielding little to no impact on noise, odor and emissions from its biosolids.

Currently, the city transports its waste 150 miles to an incinerator facility in Connecticut. Annual transportation and disposal costs are just over \$1 million dollars. As previously written, Aries will start applying for all the necessary permitting from the DEP and assorted city departments this year. Once all permitting is achieved and a lease agreement with the city is finalized, construction could begin as early as spring/summer of 2023.

Construction of the facility would take about a year to build with capital costs estimated at \$65 million to \$70 million dollars. Aries' gasification plant could be operational as early as mid-2024.



From Left to Right: Former City Councilor Scott Martin; Taunton Mayor Shaunna O'Connell; State Representative Carol Doherty; and Mitch Zucker, from FireWalker Development Group. PHOTOS BY DANIEL SCHEMER/THE TAUNTON DAILY GAZETTE



People read at an education table at the public forum.