

City gives go-ahead for well at 'Trinity Trees' site

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FORT WORTH -- The city granted a permit Tuesday to Chesapeake Energy to locate a gas well pad site on the "Trinity Trees" site just west of University Drive near the Trinity River.

At the same time, Chesapeake announced that it is shrinking the site by 44 percent, from 2.3 acres to 1.4 acres, a move that will preserve more trees. The company is also donating \$500,000 to the city tree farm.

The well is considered a high-impact gas well, city spokeswoman Cecilia Jacobs said. Permits for high-impact wells require all affected property owners within 600 feet to sign a waiver allowing the well. The only affected property owner in this case was the Tarrant Regional Water District, which agreed to the waiver.

Jim Oliver, the water district's president, said the district agreed to the waiver because drilling on the site is "the best option." The land is zoned for industrial use, and the previous owner had received permission to put an office park there, which would have required removing almost all the trees.

Water district officials checked with their lawyers and with Streams & Valleys, the conservation group that has helped redevelop the river, before granting the waiver, Oliver said.

"We felt Chesapeake had presented a reasonable plan," Oliver said.

The water district agreed last month to lease its oil and gas rights to Chesapeake on about 40 acres near the drill site for about \$14,750 an acre. The district will get a bonus of about \$586,165 and 27.6 percent in royalties during the first three years of production.

Six to eight wells

The permit will allow Chesapeake to drill for gas within 200 feet of the hiking and cycling trail along the river. The company paid more than \$15 million for eight acres.

Chesapeake officials have said they want to drill six to eight wells to access gas beneath the adjacent Union Pacific rail yard, Colonial Country Club and homes in the Colonial and Alamo Heights neighborhoods.

Union Pacific spokesman Joe Arbona said the railroad had tried to find a drill site within the rail yard but couldn't find enough space.

Julie Wilson, a Chesapeake vice president, said the energy company worked with Union Pacific to move all but the most crucial drilling equipment onto the rail yard, which Wilson called "a great feat of engineering." Shrinking the site will allow Chesapeake to preserve 81 percent of the trees there.

The company will "continue discussions" on ways to preserve the rest of the acreage for public use, Wilson said in a news release.

Hundreds opposed

More than 1,200 people signed a petition opposing Chesapeake's original plan for the site, and about 400 people turned out for a public meeting in September.

Thousands of bicyclists, joggers and walkers use the trail system. However, the city's drilling ordinance does not define the trail system as a park, and there are no homes or other protected uses within 600 feet of the site. Councilwoman Wendy Davis called for the city to rewrite its gas drilling ordinance.

"The thing that comes up again and again and again when we have these important issues is we have to follow good public process," she said.

Melissa Kohout, a frequent trail user who had asked city officials to deny the permit in September, hired an attorney to look into legal avenues to stop the drilling.

Even with the smaller drill site, "it is still going to be a huge impact," Kohout said.

Her attorney, Jason Smith, said, "We will review the permit and then take appropriate action to protect park users like Ms. Kohout."

State Rep. Lon Burnam, a Fort Worth Democrat and an active environmentalist, said he was disappointed with the city.

"We're not going to sit still for this," Burnam said.

Jim Marshall, organizer of the petition drive who started trinitytrees.org, called Chesapeake's decision to reduce the size of the site "a step in the right direction."

"I think the improvement is a result of the community coming together, making their opinions known," Marshall said.

Not a city park

Chesapeake had sought an "urban" drilling permit rather than a high-impact permit.

High-impact permits are required for sites that are within 600 feet of homes, parks or other sensitive areas. The city doesn't consider the trail a park, but city officials asked Chesapeake to get the waiver from the water district anyway, Assistant City Attorney Sarah Fullenwider said.

"In order to get this resolved, we thought it best to treat it as if they needed a waiver," she said.

Jim Rau, another activist who has researched the drilling site, said he was surprised.

"I want to know who granted a waiver for the park," he said. "Who is it that's willing to put the citizens of Fort Worth at risk?"

Rau and many other trail users had thought the grove of trees was a city park because the city used to post the hours of its use. In a 1995 zoning case, City Parks Director Richard Zavala testified that the property was a park, although that testimony was not the deciding factor in the case.

Fullenwider said the city no longer maintains the section of trail near the drilling site. The city maintains the trail system in Forest Park and other city parks, and the water district maintains the rest.

High-impact wells require 24-hour noise monitoring, the use of a closed-loop mud system and preservation of 40 percent of the tree canopy on the site. An urban permit allows an open-pit mud system and requires preservation of 30 percent of the canopy.

Tom Edwards, senior gas well inspector for the city, said most wells recycle the drilling mud using an open pit.

"People don't like the way [the open pit] looks," Edwards said. "It's really an appearance issue; it's not even an environmental issue."

Staff writer Richard Stubbe contributed to this report.

City statement

"On August 30, 2007, Chesapeake Energy applied for a pad site permit on the Pearson Lease site. The site is located north of the Trinity Trail and west of University Drive. Because of concerns about the site's proximity to the Trinity Trail, the operator has complied with additional requirements for a high-impact gas well classification.

"The corresponding gas drilling permits were issued Monday afternoon because Chesapeake met the requirements under the City of Fort Worth's gas drilling ordinance."

To see the full text of the announcement, go to the Barnett Shale blog at www.star-telegram.com.

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