

Mead commission recommends revoking AltEn's permit

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MEAD — Two weeks after putting off a decision, the Mead Planning Commission on Wednesday recommended revoking AltEn's conditional use permit to manufacture ethanol 1 mile south of the Saunders County town.

The recommendation, which will be taken up by the village's Board of Trustees on June 8, would allow AltEn to continue using equipment and machinery on site to continue cleanup and dispose of pesticide-contaminated soil and water.

The Board of Trustees could adopt the recommendation as is, or choose a different course of action.

Wednesday's decision marks a reversal of the commission's earlier plan to pull the conditional use permit it granted in 2014 to the Kansas-based company to operate an ethanol plant and pair of 4 million gallon anaerobic

digesters, which turned manure from the neighboring Mead Cattle Company into methane.

When it went into operation in 2015, AltEn began using corn and soybean seeds coated in pesticides as a feedstock to produce ethanol, rather than harvested grain as is used in nearly all other ethanol plants in the United States.

AltEn's ethanol manufacturing process left behind solid and wastewater byproducts heavily contaminated with insecticides and fungicides, which are believed to be the cause of health and environmental problems in the area.

At a special meeting on May 3, Stephen Mossman, an attorney representing AltEn, asked the commission to suspend its conditional use permit, rather than revoke it, which would allow the company or a third party to continue cleanup of the site.

That led the commission to delay a decision until Wednes-

day night at the Mead Community Center in front of about a half dozen residents of the town.

Still, the six members of the board were not set on any one course of action when the meeting began.

Wyatt Scharz said AltEn's long history of violating state environmental regulations and a lack of communication from the plant's management and ownership made him leery of letting activity to continue there.

"We haven't been given a plan for cleanup," Schwartz said. "I don't think we should make any more deals with them."

Another member, Scott Morin, initially suggested recommending the village board find AltEn in violation of the ordinance that allowed them to operate, and use that as a basis for revocation.

Morin later made the motion adding remedial conditions in the recommendation.

Ultimately, instead of adopting

the language suggested by AltEn, commissioners decided to revoke the permit with exceptions, which according to village attorney Maureen Freeman-Caddy, was done at the request of the Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy.

"They didn't want any barriers to remediation," Freeman-Caddy said after the meeting.

Mossman said the recommendation approved Wednesday night appeared to do the same thing AltEn had pushed for, though he added he would need to review the specific language to be considered by the village board.

Bill Thorson, the chairman of Mead's village board, also said he agreed with the language in the recommendation allowing for AltEn and Bayer — which has taken a point position in remediation efforts at the ethanol plant — to continue cleaning up the site.

"That's what we've been push-

ing for the whole time," Thorson said. "There's no sense in stopping them from using anything out there that cleans it up."

Revoking AltEn's permit outright would only delay cleanup, and potentially do more damage to surface and groundwater in the area, Thorson added.

State environmental regulators continue to do site visits at the ethanol facility and are in contact with plant manager Scott Tingelhoff as well as remediation experts from Bayer, which Thorson said puts "too many eyes on them to mess up again."

"The sooner we can get it cleaned up, the better," he added. "If that means we have to let them run their digesters and other things to get the water and other stuff out there, we've got to do it."

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