

# What's going on at Oyster Creek? Lacey officials, residents, others want to know

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LACEY - What's going on at Oyster Creek?

The question has been a sore point with township officials, some local residents and environmentalists, who complain that the owner of the defunct nuclear power plant has been keeping them in the dark.

Last week, the plant's owner and Lacey Township officials tentatively settled their long-running disagreement over communications, setting forth a plan for what should be divulged about the site to the local officials.

Township attorney Jerry Dasti and Joseph Delmar, a spokesman for owner Holtec International, told the Press that each side agreed that Holtec would come before the municipal Planning Board and talk in detail about how the company is taking apart the half-century-old power plant.



Ocean County Freeholder Gary Quinn, who sits on the Planning Board, said the agreement means Holtec will present details of their plans before the board, likely later this summer.

Lacey Mayor Steven Kennis stressed the agreement is tentative and follows the township's going to court and being granted a stop work order against Holtec — an indication of how badly the relationship between the parties had soured.

At the heart of the disagreement was Holtec's argument that decommissioning activities were regulated by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, while township officials insisted Holtec was still required to obtain approval from municipal boards to ensure work on the property complied with local zoning and construction rules, as the southern Ocean County newspaper The Sand Paper reported on the court action.

The stop work order halts all decommissioning activities that are not related to plant security or to the maintenance of spent nuclear fuel.

"It would be nicer to get some of the information, what they're doing ahead of time, instead of having to file stop work orders," Kennis told The Press. "They (Holtec officials) could be a little more forthcoming."

Joe Delmar, a spokesman for Holtec, said the company "will be coming to a future planning board meeting to provide an update and looks forward to working together with Lacey Township moving forward."

Holtec completed the acquisition of Oyster Creek from the energy company Exelon on July 1, 2019. Holtec plans to decommission the power plant and profit from the remains of its nearly \$1 billion decommissioning trust fund.

How the future unfolds is of vital importance to Lacey, which is trying to regain its footing after losing what for so many decades was its most important employer, community benefactor and taxpayer — essentially the lifeblood of the town.

In decades past, the plant provided hundreds of high paying jobs and was the largest commercial contributor to the tax base. Last year, the plant paid roughly \$2.3 million in property taxes, though Kennis, the mayor, said Holtec is appealing those taxes.

Of late, things have not gone smoothly.

In an online video meeting Tuesday with the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection and New Jersey State Police about emergency procedures at the plant, Lacey residents and environmentalists took aim at Holtec.

They criticized the company for not giving the public a forum to ask questions about how the company is taking apart the plant, which stopped energy production in September 2018.

Janet Tauro, New Jersey board chair of the environmental advocacy organization Clean Water Action, has been a frequent critic of the plant and

participated in Tuesday's meeting. She urged the DEP to pressure the company to share more about its operations and safety protocols.

Tauro worries about steel and concrete casks of radioactive nuclear waste that will be left on the plant's property for years to come.

"That (nuclear waste) is just a time bomb that Ocean County and New Jersey shouldn't have to live with," Tauro told a reporter.

Once the plant is fully decommissioned, plant officials say about 63 towering concrete and steel casks are expected to remain on the property and hold decaying nuclear fuel rods. The canisters could remain on site for decades, in the absence of a national plan for storing such waste.

Quinn, the Freeholder who also serves on the township's Planning Board, said numerous questions remain about the safety precautions surrounding that waste and its future in Lacey.

"God forbid there's any kind of a problem down the road where the nuclear waste starts getting hot," said Quinn. "There's no cooling tower. There's no pool to put the rods back into."

Holtec has been designing nuclear power plant equipment for decades and developed its first dry storage casks for spent nuclear fuel in 1992. In 2014, the company entered the decommissioning business as aging power plants began shuttering across the nation.

Company officials said Holtec is committed to safely storing and maintaining the 4,504 spent fuel assemblies at Oyster Creek until they are removed from the site.

Holtec officials said in March that the plant's nuclear reactor vessel was being taken apart and several buildings and transformers on site had already been demolished and removed.

There is currently no central, permanent storage facility in the United States for nuclear waste from power plants, though Holtec is applying before the federal government to build an interim, underground storage facility in New Mexico.

Until then, however, the radioactive waste will remain at Oyster Creek in Holtec's steel and concrete casks.

Paul Dressler, a founding member of the Concerned Citizens for Lacey Coalition, wants more answers from the company, including whether it has the resources to finish the decommissioning.

"They have not been transparent as far as what's going on," he said.

Dressler said he worries about the possibility of a terrorist attack on the site or a radioactive fire. He has been pressing elected officials and the company to allow a citizens advisory committee to have more input and access to information about decommission procedures at the plant.

"We could have a dangerous situation," he said.

Delmar, of Holtec, said the company plans to hold annual stakeholder forums, like those held by the plant's former owners.

"Due to COVID, we have not finalized a date for this year and will explore an online meeting if we cannot meet in person due to the health emergency," he said in an email.

In October, Gov. Phil Murphy established the Oyster Creek Safety Advisory Panel, which will include representatives of the state Department of Environmental Protection, State Police, Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness and Board of Public Utilities.

"The Oyster Creek Advisory Panel will enhance existing oversight to ensure compliance with regulatory requirements and provide assurances to the public that the proper protocols for the decommissioning are in place," Murphy said

— back before the coronavirus pushed so much state business to the back burner. “Providing the public with an opportunity to participate in the robust public input process is critical to ensuring transparency during the decommissioning process.”

County Lacey resident Regina Discenza of the Sunrise Beach neighborhood among those looking to be heard.

"I want to know what happened to the citizens advisory council that was promised," she said.

Town officials say no definitive plan yet exists to redevelop the area after Oyster Creek's demolition is complete.

*Amanda Oglesby is an Ocean County native who covers Brick, Barnegat and Lacey townships as well as the environment. She has worked for the Press for more than a decade. Reach her at @OglesbyAPP, aoglesby@gannettnj.com or 732-557-5701.*