

News

Tide could turn for Indian Point Newly elected team might encourage its closing

By Greg Bruno
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Buchanan — A five-year campaign to shutter the Indian Point nuclear power plant has seen lobbied politicians, boisterous protests, even a giant rubber stamp waved at federal regulators.

But it may be Election Day 2006 that proves the tipping point for one of the nation's most controversial nuclear facilities, critics and nuclear experts say.

Riding a wave of political reform, New York's newest governor, Eliot Spitzer, and the state's freshman member of Congress, Rep. John Hall, publicly called for the plant's closure while on the campaign trail.

Now, plant opponents are savoring their newfound relevance.

"The political, pro-nuclear forces are still strong, and the nuclear industry has lobbied both sides of the aisle," said Edwin Lyman, a senior staff scientist at the Union of Concerned Scientists in Washington, D.C. "But I think, with regard to New York in particular, there is definitely a new opportunity to reinvigorate the movement to shut down the plant."

Since 9/11, calls for the plant's closure have been vocal, with critics claiming the New York City area could not be protected from an accidental or terrorism-related release of radioactivity. Gov. George Pataki remained largely silent on the subject.

In March, Spitzer told supporters he favored mothballing the facility "when we are certain that there is adequate replacement power."

Spitzer also said he would work to ensure the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission did not renew the plant's 40-year operating permits when they expire, in 2013 and 2015.

Rep. Sue Kelly, R-Katonah, and her challenger, Hall, also traded Indian Point promises during the campaign. Both were critical of the plant's operating history; both called for improvements to plant safety. But only Hall consistently called for the plant to be closed.

Publicly, even the most vociferous Indian Point opponents are containing their enthusiasm. Campaign promises and political action are different animals, they say.

Tom Staudter, a spokesman for Hall, urged caution. "The NRC is a federal agency that is not going to rely on Governor-elect Spitzer," Staudter said. "I'm sure they'll have communication from the governor on the lines of what he thinks is best, but that kind of decision making, a lot of it will be in Washington," where support for nuclear power remains strong.

Plant officials, too, are quick to tamp down candidates' proclamations.

"These were short answers to short questions," said Jim Steets, a spokesman for Entergy Nuclear Northeast, which owns the twin nuclear reactors on the banks of the Hudson River. "How they play out remains to be seen. A lot still needs to be discussed," like what the impacts of shutting down Indian Point would be on the state's electrical grid.

One major hurdle to an immediate closure would be filling the 2,000-or-so-megawatt void left in the plant's wake. A National Academy of Sciences study this year found that, while it would be possible to close the facility, doing so would cause major challenges to the state.

Still, the post-Election Day excitement of longtime plant critics is palpable. Members of the Indian Point Safe Energy Coalition held a rally yesterday at the Hudson Valley Transportation Management Center in Hawthorne, where local, state and federal officials were conducting an evaluation of the plant's emergency capabilities.

"We are encouraged by the strong public commitment to replacing Indian Point made by those about to take office," said Lisa Rainwater, Indian Point campaign director for Riverkeeper.

Added another plant critic: "To those still pushing nuclear energy" as a safe, reliable alternate energy source, "wake up and smell the coffee."