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NYC Council Enters Debate over Troubled Nuclear Plant

Activists Celebrate Historic Action to Protect 8.5 Million NYers

Transformer Explosion, Shutdowns Underline Safety, Reliability Problems

New York, NY—Just days after an explosion and fire disabled the Indian Point Unit 3 nuclear reactor, the New York City Council joined the debate on whether the plant should be permanently closed. Dozens of city residents and environmental groups attended today’s Council meeting, praising Councilmember Donovan Richards and council leaders for introducing a resolution calling for Indian Point to be shut down and decommissioned. If adopted, the measure would mark a sharp break with former Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s policies, joining the political weight of the nation’s largest city to the efforts of state officials to see the plant closed.

“I fully support Governor Cuomo and all my colleagues in government pushing for the closure of the Indian Point nuclear power plant,” said Council Member Donovan Richards, Chair to the Committee on Environmental Protection. “The need for renewable energy only becomes more obvious as we see further examples of the dangers and inefficiencies surrounding non-renewable sources. Today not only did the City Council vote for a resolution against the Port Ambrose project, but I also introduced a resolution calling for the closure of the Indian Point nuclear power plant. The writing is on the wall — our greener, safer future must start now.”

Since the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster, New Yorkers have grown increasingly concerned about the danger Indian Point poses, and have called for city government to add its voice to those of state officials and thousands of residents who oppose continued operation of the facility. New York City is only 25 miles from Indian Point, and the city’s 8.5 million residents make up about half of those living and working within the 50-mile radius. Located near two active seismic faults, the plant is rated the most vulnerable to an earthquake-induced meltdown. Studies of the impact of a nuclear accident or terrorist attack at Indian Point estimate thousands of potential deaths and illnesses in NYC, as well as hundreds of billions in economic losses, while large areas of the city could be made uninhabitable.

“Indian Point can and must close, and it’s time the voices of New Yorkers were heard,” said Tim Judson, Executive Director of the Nuclear Information and Resource Service (NIRS). “An accident at the plant could expose millions to radiation and force the permanent evacuation of large portions of the city. No power plant is worth that kind of risk,” continued Judson. “We thank Councilmember Richards and the City Council for taking this historic step.”

Saturday's transformer explosion at Indian Point's Unit 3 reactor demonstrated the urgency of closing the plant. It is the third such incident in eight years, and occurred just two days after the same reactor unexpectedly shut down due to a steam leak. Yet these repeated failures and shutdowns occurred without causing power outages, demonstrating that fears of electricity shortages without Indian Point are unfounded. The state Energy Planning Board determined in 2012 there are more than enough options available to ensure reliable service without the plant, as have a number of studies and legislative inquiries. Under direction of the state, ConEd is also implementing a number of projects to prepare for Indian Point's retirement.

"Some City Council members are afraid of blackouts if Indian Point is shut down. Not true," said Ken Gale, founder of the NYC Safe Energy Coalition. "Con Ed's contract with Entergy means that NYC and Westchester combined get between 3% (summer) & 7% (winter) of the electricity from Indian Point, with the rest going to New England, according to Matt Wald in the NY Times. According to the NY Independent System Operator, which oversees the electricity grid, NYC has excess capacity *well* above that, so there is no fear of a blackout," continued Gale. "NYC is getting more efficient and renewable sources are increasing, making our excess capacity even greater."

Today's action by the Council is the latest in a series of bold measures charting a sustainable energy future for the city. At the meeting, the council also took up a resolution opposing construction of the proposed Port Ambrose export terminal for liquefied natural gas (LNG) on Long Island. The Indian Point activists joined anti-fracking and climate change groups, and cheered the council's stance in favor of opposing dirty energy infrastructure and developing sustainable energy sources to power the city. The council resolution would add significant political support to the state's efforts, and make it clear the city's energy policy will promote Indian Point's replacement with clean, sustainable energy sources.

"From Indian Point to Port Ambrose, we are surrounded by extreme energy projects that threaten the future of New York City," said NIRS's Judson. "Whether from a nuclear disaster, natural gas explosions, super-storms like Sandy, or sea-level rise, our reliance on dirty energy is not sustainable, and threatens the lives and livelihoods of people throughout the city. Solar power in NYC alone could generate three times as much power as Indian Point and eliminate most of the natural gas power plants in the city, cleaning the air while creating thousands of jobs and lowering our ConEd bills," he concluded.

The activists are also enthusiastic about the resolution's call for a "just transition plan" to minimize the impact of Indian Point's closure on employees and local communities. They pointed out the importance of making sure workers and communities that host nuclear and fossil fuel facilities have a bridge to the future, because power plant closures are inevitable and necessary as we shift energy to renewable energy sources.

"Indian Point has to close, but that isn't the end of the story," said Alice Slater, on the Coordinating Committee of the People's Climate Movement, NY, which grew out of the more than 400,000 people who marched in New York City last fall for Mother Earth and a sustainable planet. "Nearly a billion dollars is set aside to decommission the reactors, and that is an important opportunity to preserve jobs and protect the community. But it can't stop there. We need to make sure this is a win-win," continued

Slater. "Protecting public health and safety also has to include taking care of the people who live and work in the community. Councilmember Richards should be commended for including that demand in the resolution."

The council resolution introduces the possibility of a new level of political opposition to the plant, adding to legal and economic challenges that make the plant's future uncertain. Indian Point's Unit 2 reactor has been operating under an expired federal license since 2013, and Unit 3's license will expire later this year. Entergy's application for 20-year extensions is being challenged by NY Attorney General Schneiderman and the environmental group Riverkeeper. In addition, the state Department of Environmental Conservation has denied Indian Point necessary permits to continue using the Hudson River for its cooling system, and the NY Department of State has denied a crucial coastal management certification. All three matters are wending their way through the legal process.

At the same time, aging nuclear plants like Indian Point are under increasing economic pressure. In recent years, nuclear operating costs have risen more than 5% annually industry-wide, with some plants experiencing even greater increases. A number of reactors have become unprofitable, as a result. Indian Point's owner, Entergy, shuttered the Vermont Yankee reactor in December due to financial losses, and two of the company's other nuclear plants in the region are believed to be unprofitable, as well. Rising costs and more frequent outages at Indian Point could spell doom for the plant, together with the legal uncertainties and mounting political opposition.

"Under the cloak of National Security the public is under-informed while the nuclear industry and government are held less accountable," said Joel Kupferman, Director of the New York Environmental Law and Justice Project (NYELJP).

"Closing Indian Point and beginning the decommissioning process, we are doing some of the most important work we could possibly be doing, especially now, after the warning of its third transformer fire in 8 years," said Catherine Skopic, Legislation Committee Chair of Shut Down Indian Point Now (SDIPN!). "We are grateful to Environmental Committee Chair, Donovan Richards, and his co-sponsors, Councilmembers Helen Rosenthal and Stephen Levin, for introducing this significant and timely resolution," Skopic continued. "Various studies show that we have the renewable energy sources to guarantee reliability of our electricity without Indian Point, we have the capability of a just transition for workers at the plant, and all people, the Hudson River, our water shed and the whole of life will benefit."