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Two views of Pilgrim Station aired at forum

By: MATTHEW NADLER | 22 HOURS AGO



Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station executives listen during the debate over the power plant.

It's become a rite of spring in Plymouth.

Representatives of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission come to town to present their annual report on the Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station. Then they take questions from an audience which is largely hostile to the continued operation of the plant.

This year was slightly different. While those who would like to see the power plant closed were well represented, this time they were counterbalanced by a large contingent of Pilgrim Station employees speaking in support of it. Many of them made a point to note they lived close to the plant and emphasized their commitment to public safety.

Pilgrim Station has been under increased scrutiny following a series of incidents during 2013. Among the problems was the loss of off-site power during the February 2013 blizzard. According to the NRC, inspectors found problems with how plant staff implemented its corrective action plan. "Pilgrim's actions were not sufficient," said the NRC's John Grieves during the meeting. He led the team which did the emergency inspection. In some cases, Entergy staff failed to complete corrective action or did not follow proper procedure, Grieves said.

“Our performance has not met our typical normal high standards,” said John Dent, Entergy’s site vice-president at Pilgrim. Improvements in preventive maintenance and safety performance have been made, according to Pilgrim’s General Manager, Steve Verrochi.

The plant also lost power during the January 27, 2105 storm. Federal inspectors plan to issue a report on that incident sometime by early May. Pilgrim voluntarily shut down during a later blizzard.

When the time came for members of the audience to ask questions, many of those who came to the microphone let the NRC officials know how they felt. Citing the most recent inspection report for Pilgrim, Mashpee resident Arlene Williamson called it one of the worst run plants in the country, and added it ran on old and outdated equipment.

Karen Vale, speaking for Cape Cod Baywatch, expressed doubt that Pilgrim Station can handle the increasing number of major storms. NRC Region 1 Administrator Dan Dorman said nuclear power plants are designed to lose offsite power during severe weather, but noted that it happens more often than it should at Pilgrim.

Diane Turco faulted the NRC’s oversight, saying they were mistaken to think Entergy would comply with the NRC’s regulations. “Even with increased oversight they tull have failed. it’s a failing reactor run by failed company.”

But slowly, the tide of opinion shifted as plant employees and others spoke out in its support. Katie Woods, a North Plymouth native who works at Pilgrim as a design engineer said “the importance of safety is ingrained in my mind. Everyone’s number one priority at Pilgrim is to ensure safety.” Another Pilgrim Station engineer, Jerome David, said he was taught to provide a “safe and reliable product.”

A number of people who don’t work at the power plan also spoke in support. Dan Hurley, president of Utility Workers Union of America Local 369, which represents some of the employees at Pilgrim, said he stood by bt the performance and safety of the the power plant. Shutting it down is “short-sighted,” he said, “nuclear energy is reliable and clean.”

Plymouth Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Kevin O'Reilly noted the number of jobs and the economic impact Pilgrim has on Plymouth. "The plant has been a good neighbor," he said. His view was echoed by Robert Rio of Associated Industries of Massachusetts, who said energy costs are important to his members, "we would be burning more oil if not for Pilgrim," he said.

Mary Lampert of Pilgrim Watch countered the claims of an increased emphasis on safety, calling the power plant an antique and arguing that Entergy is cutting back on maintenance.

Two members of Plymouth's Nuclear Matters Committee also spoke. Heather Lightner expressed concern about the safety of Pilgrim's new dry cask storage system, particularly the ability of moved out of one the casks if repairs are needed. In contrast, Chuck Adey, who worked on the plant's construction, said he has seen a lot of changes. Management at Pilgrim is "a lot more transparent," he said.