

By [Frank Mand](#)

January 23, 2016 5:00AM

Plymouth Task force targets Pilgrim closure

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PLYMOUTH – For 43 years the town was largely on the outside, looking in, as state and federal authorities made decisions on the operation of the Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station. But with last October's announcement that the plant is closing town officials have concluded that they definitely need a seat at the table.

The responsibility for making that happen now appears to rest largely with the Entergy Working Group, sometimes referred to as the Nuclear Task Force, a recently formed group that is comprised of town, regional and legislative officials.

Jessica Casey, who normally wears the title Economic Development Director, spoke on behalf of the Entergy Working Group at its first public presentation this past week, offering an overview of the potential impact of the closure and defining the group's role in the effort to mitigate those impacts.

First, though the actual closure date has yet to be determined, Casey underscored that the group was working with a real sense of urgency.

"The day after the announcement (that Pilgrim would close either in 2017 or 2019) the working group had its first meeting," Casey said, "and since then we have been very active, reaching out to stakeholders, government officials and to other host communities as well."

In the past three months Entergy Working Group members attended a Nuclear Regulatory Commission "decommissioning rulemaking" session, traveled to Washington to meet with elected officials, went to UMass-Amherst to attend a conference of the Institute of Nuclear Host Communities and next week head to Vermont to attend the Nuclear Decommissioning Citizens Advisory Panel.

Despite their schedule and sense of urgency, the Entergy Working Group's take on the town's post-Pilgrim future, as presented by Casey at the selectmen's meeting Tuesday, was generally upbeat.

Casey noted that while the town's population had increased over 9 percent (from 2000 to 2010), the size of Plymouth's workforce had nearly doubled (2000 to 2013).

The vitality of the downtown business area, the presentation also noted, along with the low vacancy rates, the revitalization of the downtown area expected around the new Town Hall (now under construction) and the wide range of industry sectors represented in town all suggested an economic resiliency that would help Plymouth weather the closure.

Casey also argued that at this stage in the process, due to the proactive response of the Board of Selectmen, the assistance of the town's state and federal legislators and their partnership with the Institute for Nuclear Host Communities (at UMass-Amherst) the town is better prepared than almost any other community that has faced a nuclear plant closure.

"The Working Group members have been working with other host communities, working with others on best practices and lessons learned, and we have learned from our work with UMASS that Plymouth is farther ahead at this point than any of the other communities they have worked with," Casey said, adding "And we have no intention of taking our foot off the pedal."

Better prepared, perhaps, but Casey has a long list of issues the town still has to prepare for, including the responsibility and cost of maintaining safety and security at the plant after Entergy has moved on, and the negative economic effect when an estimated 85 percent of the plant's employees (whose salaries average over \$100,000) sell their homes and move on.

Where the town – and specifically the working group – should concentrate its efforts was also discussed.

Casey noted that even with a seat at the table some of the issues, such as the long-term storage of the spent fuel generated by the plant and the oversight of the decommissioning trust fund (close to a billion dollars that is meant to pay for the physical deconstruction of the site), might remain largely out of the town's control.

That didn't please everyone.

Selectmen Tony Provenzano said he was not willing to "accept the premise that we should be a nuclear storage site for years to come."

"This can't be a hundred-year solution," Provenzano said. "We should be looking for the removal of that fuel no later than the end of decommissioning."

Then there is a possibility that the SAFSTOR decommissioning process that Entergy is expected to utilize could take decades or longer to complete.

Nevertheless, other issues Casey said, such as the future use of the 1,700-acre buffer around the plant, jobs and the employment base, were more likely to be impacted by actions the town takes on now.

"Other communities have devoted a lot of time and hours focusing on things they can't impact on the local level," Casey said, "and as a result economic development, land and use and other ideas have fallen flat or they have had to come back and have that conversation later."

The issue of the disposition of Pilgrim's 1,700-acre buffer is definitely a hot-button issue.

If it were transformed into residential housing, perhaps an extension of The Pinehills, it could dramatically alter the environmental and political landscape of the town.

What happens to Pilgrim's property is also of concern to the plant's critics, who have long argued that plant-owner Entergy has not been a good steward of the Bay and the shore.

Attorney Meg Sheehan spoke during the discussion of the plans Tuesday, arguing that if the town wants to have that seat at the table it needs to assert its authority under local zoning laws.

In 2014 Sheehan and others sued the town over its decision not to insist that, though they had traditionally used the special permit process for new projects, Entergy did not need a special permit to begin construction of the massive concrete pad now utilized to support the dry cask storage canisters at the plant.

"Pilgrim is here only because the town gave them a special permit in the first place," Sheehan argued, and said she was worried that similar to the dry cask storage pad the town was ready to give up local control over the decommissioning process.

Sheehan suggested the Entergy Working Group look closely at these issues and consider appointing a public health expert and representatives of citizens groups and public interest groups to the working group.

"It is important that there is citizen involvement in the decommissioning process, that they have some input moving forward," Sheehan said.

Casey listed a variety of other closure impacts the town should address, including the diminution and eventual disappearance of the payments Entergy makes under their PILOT (Payment in Lieu of Taxes) agreement with the town.

At present that PILOT is \$9.25 million. Within five years of closure, Casey said, it would likely have dropped to a single million.

The town and region will also face the loss of hundreds of thousands of dollars that Entergy contributes to the cost of emergency preparedness and \$77 million in annual wages and benefits paid to Pilgrim employees, and could see the real estate market glutted by the sudden sale of homes owned by former Pilgrim employees (\$58 million-worth in Plymouth alone).

On the other hand, Casey noted, based on other communities that have experienced plant closures, the town could expect to benefit from additional economic support and upwards of \$25 million to restore the Rocky Hill Road site after it is fully decommissioned.

With all of this in mind Casey asked the selectmen to formally endorse three action items that would facilitate the Entergy Working Group's efforts.

First, to give the group the authority to "coordinate engagement" with external stakeholders and partners, including Entergy, the NRC, the Department of Energy and other nuclear host communities.

Second, to allow the group to draft letters to some of those same stakeholders and governmental agencies.

And third, to establish a specific role for the town's existing Nuclear Matters Committee, notably to "advise the Board of Selectmen on current plant operations," assist the Entergy Working Group's efforts and generally research nuclear plant closures.

The selectmen unanimously endorsed all three.

Entergy Working Group members

Ken Tavares, chairman, Board of Selectman

Melissa Arrighi, town manager, town of Plymouth

Lee Hartmann, Planning and Development director, town of Plymouth

Lynne Barrett, finance director, town of Plymouth

Michael Jackman, district director for U.S. Rep. Bill Keating

Sen. Vinny deMacedo and office

Rep. Mathew Muratore and office

Rep. Tom Calter and office

Pasquale Ciaramella, executive director, Old Colony Planning Council

Kevin O'Reilly, executive director, Chamber of Commerce

Ed Santos, treasurer, Plymouth Regional Economic Development Foundation

Tom Wallace, president, Plymouth Regional Economic Development Foundation

Jessica Casey, economic development director, Plymouth Regional Economic Development Foundation

Expected to join the Entergy Working Group

Aaron Wallace, Emergency Management director, town of Plymouth

Richard Rothstein, Chairman, Nuclear Matters Committee, town of Plymouth

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