
By Meg Sheehan

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OF NUCLEAR INTEREST: A chance to do something about nuclear waste

The town has the chance to make a difference in how Entergy stores the 44 years of nuclear waste that is sitting at Pilgrim.

With Entergy's announcement that it is going to close its Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station in Plymouth by June 2019, we are hearing a lot of talk from town officials about doing something. Talk is good, but now is the time for action. The town has the chance to make a difference in how Entergy stores the 44 years of nuclear waste that is sitting at Pilgrim. This nuclear waste is stranded and has no place to go. It is likely to be there for decades if not hundreds of years. If the town does not act now, the chance to ensure the most robust, properly sited, and secure nuclear waste site at Pilgrim will be lost.

What can the town do? It can enforce its own local zoning bylaws. The purpose of these laws is to protect public health, safety, welfare and the economic value of people's homes, land and businesses. Pilgrim is in Plymouth only because in 1967 the town gave Entergy's predecessor, Boston Edison, a zoning permit to build and operate Pilgrim. The permit allows the nuclear waste to be stored inside the reactor building. At the time, the plan was to send the nuclear waste off-site to a deep geological storage facility or to reprocess it. Neither of those is happening any time soon. So Plymouth needs to deal with Pilgrim's legacy now.

Seven local residents are trying to do something to address Pilgrim's nuclear waste issues. In 2013, they brought a lawsuit to enforce the town's zoning laws so that residents and town officials could try to have a say over how and where Entergy stores the nuclear waste. Instead of joining with its residents, the town is fighting the case. The town is spending taxpayer money to fight its own residents who are trying to make the town a better place by having a robust nuclear waste storage facility. These local residents are the backbone of Plymouth: a school nurse, a retired firefighter who served the town for decades, a successful entrepreneur, a whale watch naturalist, a health aide, a grandmother, and a civil association leader. They all live within two miles of Pilgrim and are concerned about the value of their homes and the future of their families.

The town officials who granted Boston Edison the 1967 zoning permit – Mr. Quinn, Mr. Collari and Mr. Forth – no doubt had the best interests of the town's residents in mind at that time. They had the courage to use local zoning to try to protect the town's interests. They never anticipated that some 50 years later, in 2016, there would be a legacy of almost a half century of nuclear waste left onsite by the time Pilgrim stopped operating. For almost 50 years, the town enforced local zoning laws at Pilgrim, requiring new permits for new buildings and uses. So what is going on now, in 2016, when town officials will not take a stand to use the zoning laws to try to improve the way nuclear waste is stored – but instead just want to talk about things?

Meg Sheehan is a lawyer and Plymouth native. Along with Earthrise Law Center, she is representing the seven plaintiffs in the lawsuit over nuclear waste storage. She also works with the local group Cape Cod Bay Watch on issues relating to Pilgrim's nuclear waste and water pollution.

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