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By Gary L. Smith of the Journal Star

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Ag department gives tentative OK to hog farm; opponents plan next move

WENONA — The timing of an Illinois Department of Agriculture decision to grant at least tentative approval for construction of a 20,000-head hog confinement facility outside Wenona came as a surprise to area residents who have opposed the proposal since it was announced last spring.

But they have hit the ground running as they plan for the next step of their fight against the Sandy Creek Lane LLC operation planned on a rural road in far eastern Marshall County, about 3.5 miles northwest of this small community and near the border with LaSalle County.

"It's something that we're working on right now," said Mike Phillips, an Illinois Valley Community College geology professor and neighboring resident who has been a researcher and spokesman for project opponents who have banded together under such names as Friends of Sandy Creek and SOS for "Save Our Sandy."

The decision "caught us a little off guard. We didn't expect it to happen so soon," Phillips said. "We feel that there are some questions that (state officials) still haven't answered."

In a letter dated Oct. 28, the state agency notified the operator of the planned facility, VMC Management Corp. of Williamsburg, Iowa., that officials had completed their review of a plan that had been subject to a lengthy question-and-answer process about its details. VMC is the livestock production arm of a large veterinary practice that includes Dr. Nicolas Rippel, a Toluca native who had worked on area farm fields as a teenager.

"As a result of the review, the Department finds that 'more likely than not, the provisions of (Illinois livestock law) have been met,'" department official Warren D. Goetsch said in a letter quoting a key clause of the statute.

It was welcome news to the developers, said Nic Anderson, a frequent spokesman for the project through the Illinois Livestock Development Group, an industry association funded by several organizations.

"Dr. Nicolas Rippel, on behalf of Sandy Creek Lane, would like to acknowledge the due diligence of (the department of agriculture) and appreciate the many community supporters and the many well wishes as they look forward to the construction of their project in the days ahead," Anderson said.

The news was not welcome to residents who feel that factors ranging from their daily quality of life to their property values will be affected by the breeding and farrowing operation, which will involve producing piglets to be weaned and shipped out to feeding operations elsewhere. Environmental concerns about manure runoffs also have been voiced.

"A lot of us in this area would be really affected, so it was kind of a hit," said Leslie Smith, whose family lives near the site. "I think a lot of us were really disappointed in the department of agriculture."

Marshall County Board members had earlier authorized a lengthy and detailed letter stating they were "adamantly opposed" to the project, but local government opinions are purely advisory under a process giving total control to the state agency.

Under that law, "I think we've done about everything that we can do," said board Chairman Gary Kroeschen.

One long-running and often heated issue on whether developers could reach an agreement with Evans Township on use of heavy trucks on local roads not built for them appeared to remain up in the air Saturday. Although that is not directly regulated by state standards, it could have a big impact on operations of the facility.

Anderson said an agreement had been reached. But Township Road Commissioner John Lauf said none had been.

"We've met and talked and everything, but we still don't have anything," Lauf said Saturday.

Phillips said residents were reviewing all information related to the process to determine a legal basis for seeking reconsideration of the decision under administrative law. They had earlier retained legal counsel, and they're utilizing that assistance in pursuing options to challenge whether the facility has complied with eight criteria specified in state law, he said.

"Essentially, we're going point-by-point to see whether they've addressed all the concerns that we had," Phillips said. "It's going to take us a while to put that together. We want to make sure we're doing everything right."

The developers have not publicly announced a construction schedule, which probably will depend heavily on weather, Anderson indicated.

"Mother Nature will most likely determine a construction timetable," he said.

[Sandy Creek Letter](#)



PHOTO/ GARY L. SMITH/JOURNAL STAR

Geologist Mike Phillips (in green shirt), a leader of a group opposing a large hog farm near Wenona, spoke at a rally in a Wenona park earlier this year. Phillips said neighbors are researching legal grounds to challenge the Illinois Department of Agriculture's decision to allow construction of the facility.