

EPA approves permit for controversial fracking disposal well in Plum

By Jake Bolster
Inside Climate News

The Environmental Protection Agency has approved a permit for a toxic fracking wastewater disposal well named Sedat 4A in Plum, rejecting residents' concerns that leaks from the well could migrate and pollute other wells and groundwater.

The decision comes as Pennsylvania faces a fracking disposal reckoning. Historically, the state

has trucked much of its fracking waste to Ohio, which has a more robust infrastructure of injection wells. But now, as scrutiny over the safety of storing toxic wastewater underground mounts in Ohio, oil and gas companies operating in Pennsylvania find themselves in need of other reliable options for disposing of their wastewater.

In the fracking process, drillers pump up to 20 million gallons of water and fracking chemicals into a well at high pressure to extract gas

from small seams in the Marcellus Shale. Once the well starts producing gas, about 5% to 10% of the water used to frack the well resurfaces.

Because this produced water has dissolved elements in the shale, it contains hydrocarbons, heavy metals and salt concentrations up to seven times higher than sea water, and can sometimes contain radium 226 or 228, radioactive isotopes, in addition to the chemicals added for fracking.

While almost half of Pennsyl-

vania's produced water is then recycled to frack additional wells, it reaches a point when it can no longer be reused and must be disposed of. Treating the water to remove the chemicals and natural contaminants is prohibitively expensive.

One solution has been to convert some of the state's hundreds of thousands of conventional gas wells into disposal, or injection, wells. These conventional wells — which bore into porous rock formations and run only vertically a

few thousand feet into the earth — were drilled decades ago, and many have been sitting abandoned for years.

In a day's work, a typical injection well pumps millions of gallons of toxic wastewater from fracking thousands of feet below ground at high pressure into the old, abandoned well. Currently, there are 14 such injection wells operating in the state.

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Seventh annual Garbage Olympics draws hundreds of participants in citywide trash cleanup competition



Sebastian Foltz/Post-Gazette photos

Alex Robinson of Re360 throws an old car shock absorber onto a growing pile of garbage with Brady Winner and other volunteers in Pittsburgh's Allentown neighborhood Saturday during the annual citywide trash pickup competition.

TALKIN' TRASH

By Michael Korsh
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Pittsburgh has become a hotspot for Olympic-level sporting events, from the 2023 National Senior Games in July to USA Judo's Junior Olympic Championships, to be held next June.

But over the weekend, the City of Champions became host to a far more eccentric competition: the Garbage Olympics.

With more than 35 neighborhood teams across Pittsburgh and Penn Hills competing, the seventh annual Garbage Olympics saw almost 500 volunteers vie to pick up the most litter from local streets.

Within a two-hour span Saturday morning, participants collected more than 926 bags of trash, as well as nearly 400 tires and hundreds of television sets, electronic waste and other bulk items. This year's winners were the Allentown Trash Dragons — their

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Allentown CDC vice president Nancy Lomasney tosses a tire onto a stack of them during the Garbage Olympics.

'A TOOL TO HELP'

State enacts law to empower land banks and fight urban blight

By Neena Hagen
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

As Pittsburgh's long-struggling land bank notches more sales, a new state law has taken effect that would speed up property transfers, potentially shaving months off a winding process and allowing developers and community groups to take over blighted homes in as little as a year.

The law — which sailed through the state House and Senate and was enacted earlier this month — would allow land banks in Pittsburgh and other county municipalities to more efficiently toss out old tax liabilities that have encumbered thousands of the city's abandoned properties for decades.

"It's a tool to help," said State Sen. Wayne Fontana, D-Allegheny, who sponsored the legislation and served on the land bank's board for years. "The mission is to get those properties in the hands of folks that can rehab or rebuild them."

The new legislation adds to a series of recent victories for Pittsburgh's land bank.

In August, Pittsburgh City Council passed a crucial proposal that empowers the land bank to take in properties from the city's inventory of more than 13,000,

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Another N.Y. train for city?

State has agreement with Norfolk Southern

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Pittsburgh could get a second daily train to New York under a multimillion-dollar agreement between the state and Norfolk Southern Corp.

The agreement would put the public on the hook for \$200 million in "infrastructure and safety improvements" that are needed to add another Amtrak passenger train to Norfolk Southern's already-busy Pittsburgh Line, according to a statement from the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation. The agency didn't say whether the agreement would give right-of-way priority to passenger or freight trains.

The lone daily train between Pittsburgh and New York — Amtrak's Pennsylvanian, which passes through Harrisburg and Philadelphia — leaves Downtown at 7:30 a.m. on its way eastbound. Its westbound companion train arrives about 8 p.m.

Doubling the number of trains on the route would have "key" economic benefits, PennDOT Secretary Mike Carroll said in a statement from the agency.

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Pittsburgh tech leaders stepping onto world stage

Capitalizing on AI: No longer a 'flyover city'

By Evan Robinson-Johnson
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

It's been more than 100 years since steel tycoon Andrew Carnegie walked the streets of Pittsburgh, but you can talk to him yourself through a new generative AI system developed by Johnstown-based Problem Solutions.

Or, if dead philanthropists aren't your jam, there's Charlie, a 4-foot-tall holographic alien. Problem Solutions developed him for

the Air Force.

On Friday, they brought both virtual mascots to Homestead, where more than 100 regional companies converged for the Pittsburgh Technology Council's annual TechFest. Developers shared ways to capitalize on the power of generative AI and expressed optimism for the region's growing influence on the global tech stage.

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Sebastian Foltz/Post-Gazette

Sean McPherson of Khan Academy leads a workshop on front-end architecture coding Friday at Pittsburgh TechFest in Homestead.



Sebastian Foltz/Post-Gazette

FESTIVAL DANCING Thomas Scharff and Jennifer Ponce participate in El Alcatraz, an Afro-Peruvian candle dance game, during the 41st annual Latin American and Caribbean Festival on Saturday at the University of Pittsburgh. The event featured Latin and Caribbean food trucks, vendors and organization booths, as well as musical performances.

Neighborhood teams clean up

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second victory in a row, edging out Mount Oliver's team by just half a point.

For years, the event's organizers, Renee Robinson, Lena Andrews and Alicia Carberry, coordinated trash pickups in their respective neighborhoods. But in 2017, the trio saw the potential to turn small acts of generosity into something bigger.

"We were like, 'Well, how about we try to all have one day and make it a competition?' We're in the City of Champions, you know," said Ms. Robinson.

The inaugural Garbage Olympics saw just five neighborhoods participate, but over the past seven years, the initiative has evolved into an all-out rivalry: The 2022 event drew a record 48 teams, each with cutthroat names, like the East Liberty Trash Warriors.

"Every year, someone is like, 'OK, we're gonna get the pickup truck, and we know these spots where people are dumping.' So I do think there is a competitive nature — getting the biggest items and finding that 'gold mine,' I guess, of where people are dumping," said Ms. Robinson.

In addition to awarding the team that accumulates the most trash, the competition also honors the largest team (Oakland), weirdest item found (a kid-size Barbie truck in Sheraden), and the most team spirit (Penn Hills).

"Pittsburgh has so much neighborhood pride that it's fun to be on a team for your neighborhood and do something good for it," said Ms. Andrews, who also leads the East Liberty Trash Warriors.

Participants also say the competition allows volunteers to step in and collect items — such as e-waste — the city's Department of Public Works often leaves unaddressed.

"The TVs and tires are huge, and the city doesn't pick them up," said Nancy Lomasney, vice president of the Allentown Community Development Corporation. "It's an eyesore, and the tires are a breeding ground for mosquitoes."



Sebastian Foltz/Post-Gazette

Brady Winner moves a car bumper Saturday in Allentown. Allentown residents and volunteers from the Hilltop Alliance, Re360 and the Allentown CDC spent the morning trying to defend their crown as Pittsburgh Garbage Olympics champions. Multiple neighborhoods from across Pittsburgh participated in the annual citywide trash pickup. Allentown came out on top again.

Region's neighborhood trash competition

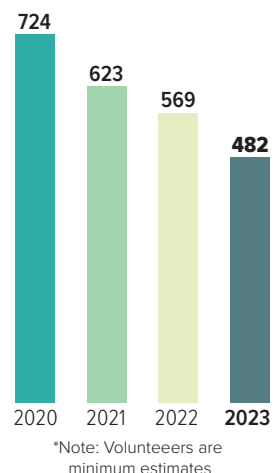
The annual Garbage Olympics, held Saturday, is Pittsburgh's yearly neighborhood vs. neighborhood competition to see who can pick up the most trash. In its seventh year, the event has grown from five East End neighborhoods to some even outside of the city of Pittsburgh.

NEIGHBORHOODS PARTICIPATING

YEAR	PARTICIPATING NEIGHBORHOODS	WINNER
2020	38	Carrick
2021	46	Penn Hills
2022	48	Allentown
2023	36	Allentown

Source: <https://www.pghgo.org/about>

VOLUNTEERS*



James Hillston/Post-Gazette

In 2019, Neighborhood Allies, a nonprofit, honored the Garbage Olympics

with its Neighborhood Image Award at its yearly Healthy Neighborhood

Celebration — a testament to the event's contributions in beautifying Pittsburgh's streets.

But for Ms. Andrews, the most rewarding aspect of the event is its potential to catalyze meaningful change — even along one city street or alleyway.

"The goal is for people to feel empowered," she said. "A lot of the problems in today's society can feel overwhelming, but this is something you can do something about really easily."

"You see something you don't like about your neighborhood, you get together with your neighbors, and you address the problem. And you've invested time in making the place where you live beautiful."

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Residents concerned that well leaks may pollute groundwater

PLUM, FROM C-1

"We're seeing a trend of these conventional well operators repurposing non-producing conventional wells into injection wells," said Gillian Graber, executive director and founder of Protect PT, an organization focused on educating Pennsylvanians living in the state's southwestern counties on the impacts of fossil fuel drilling on their communities.

"These conventional wells are just simply not engineered for this purpose," she said.

Injecting oil and gas waste down a well repurposed for disposal can test the limits of its materials.

"If you're risking using an old well for many decades to come, it's going to be re-pressurized many times at pressures higher than it ever saw as a gas well," said Tony Ingraffea, a professor emeritus of engineering at Cornell University. Mr. Ingraffea, who has served as a consultant for residents fighting the proposed new well, added that re-pressurizations occur with each delivery, of which there can be several a day.

The new well would be the second in Plum. If proper steps are not taken to ensure the well maintains proper pressure levels, he said, the results can be dangerous.

"The well should only be doing what it was designed to do, nothing more," Mr. Ingraffea said.

Stephanie Catarino Wissman, executive director of the American Petroleum Institute's Pennsylvania branch, said repurposed oil and gas wells are safe.

"Industry standards and best practices, in tandem with stringent state and federal regulations, are designed to make energy development safe and responsible. Highly regulated by the state and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, underground injection is the safest and most effective means of isolating waste while protecting groundwater and the environment," she said in a statement.

The regulatory permitting process for Sedat 4A involved an EPA review of

plans submitted by Penneco, an oil and gas waste disposal company, and a review of public comments made about the project. Commenters cited environmental, operational and geological concerns with Penneco's proposals.

Based on data from the company, the EPA determined that the rock formation in Plum was suitable for holding large quantities of the toxic wastewater essentially in perpetuity, without leaking.

But the agency, in approving the permit last week, said Penneco could not begin operations at the disposal well without performing a test showing that there were no leaks, to the satisfaction of EPA's Region 3 water division director.

Under federal law, the agency noted, an injection well has "mechanical integrity" if "there is no significant leak in the casing, tubing or packer" and "there is no significant fluid movement into an underground source of drinking water through vertical channels adjacent to the injection well bore."

Environmentalists and some Plum residents have strenuously opposed permitting a second well, citing environmental justice concerns, possible water pollution, increases in noise pollution, decreases in property values and potential harms to businesses as other reasons not to issue the permit. All of those concerns fell out of the agency's "regulatory criteria," which only concerns sources of drinking water in the area.

In the wake of the EPA's decision, and pending approval from the DEP and other local governments, Sedat 4A would become the 15th injection well permitted in Pennsylvania and could go into operation this fall, barring further litigation that some Plum residents say they are exploring.

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New Pa. law speeds up property transfers

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opening a well that had previously been closed. The development came after a Post-Gazette investigative series exposed the city's glut of unsafe homes and a lack of a program to return them to productive use.

But it could take time for Pittsburgh's land bank to take advantage of the new state law. The land bank has yet to establish a taxing agreement with the city, county and school district, meaning agency officials would have to pay off all tax debt to acquire properties — costs that can run up to hundreds of thousands of dollars. It's a task that's made all the more difficult after City Council last month voted to cut half of the land bank's funding — to \$3.5 million from \$7 million.

As Pittsburgh waits to ink crucial deals to build a fully functioning land bank, other local land banks have begun to use the tool offered by the new state law.

Representatives from the Tri-COG land bank, which serves more than 20 municipalities east of Pittsburgh, say they plan to file their first round of property transactions using the state law next month. Tri-COG has sold 54 homes and lots since its launch in 2017 — three years after Pittsburgh's land bank was created — with 78 more in the pipeline.

"The longer that properties are legally in the hands

of owners who are deceased, or have abandoned them, the more vulnerable they are," said An Lewis, executive director of the Tri-COG land bank. The new legislation "may make the difference between an abandoned property being savable or a demolition."

Unlike Pittsburgh's land bank, Tri-COG has buy-in from its local taxing bodies — the municipalities, county and school districts — and can acquire new properties for as little as \$3,000 in fees without assuming any of the tax liability.

"It does make the transaction of every property more efficient," Jamil Bey, a Pittsburgh land bank board member, said of the new state law. "No transaction should take three years anymore."

In many cases, community groups' fight to take hold of dilapidated city-owned properties has taken upward of five years, if it succeeds at all, records and interviews show. In that time, properties from Hazelwood to Garfield have continued to deteriorate, posing dangers to neighboring residents.

The land bank has made inroads on blighted neighborhoods this summer — selling five properties in Hazelwood, Mt. Washington and Larimer.

"We're finally seeing progress," said Mr. Bey. "I'm very encouraged."

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Pittsburgh woman accused of tethering dog indoors, letting it starve

A Pittsburgh woman is accused of abandoning her dog, tethering it indoors and letting it starve to death.

An arrest warrant was issued for Talazia Johnson, 22.

She's facing two counts of aggravated cruelty to animals, two counts of cruelty to animals, four counts of neglect of animals and abandonment of animals by owner.

Pittsburgh Public Safety said that on July 28, police and animal control officers were called to the 2400 block of Bedford Avenue for reports of a deceased dog in a vacant apartment.

The officers allegedly saw a deceased dog that was "significantly" decomposed. A leash was attached to the animal's neck area and was tied to a door handle inside, police

said.

Post-Gazette news partner KDKA reported the necropsy results indicated the dog died of starvation, according to a criminal complaint.

The Animal Friends Humane Investigations Department assisted police in the investigation.

— Pittsburgh Post-Gazette