

Developer financed citizen group's activity

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Consultant aided Russell residents in effort to back power plant

By Beth Daley, Globe Staff | September 8, 2009

Russell First! bills itself as a grass-roots group - citizens who organized on their own in the tiny Western Massachusetts community to support a proposed wood-burning power plant.

But it turns out the power plant's developer also played a key role: It paid a consultant to help the residents organize.

Last year, Russell Biomass, the developer, hired Avakian Consulting, a firm with an office in Boston, which advertises "Community Outreach that Wins!" On its website, the company says it "has serviced its clients' needs and developed strategies that have helped win BILLIONS in local funding campaigns on their behalf."

Avakian workers, on Russell Biomass's dime, met with residents at least twice last spring to organize support for the plant, a spokesman for Russell Biomass acknowledged in a recent interview. Avakian came up with the group's name and created a Web page that describes the group as providing "grass-roots support for Russell biomass."

Members of Russell First! say they are true supporters of the project, which is seeking to burn wood to power about 50,000 homes. But an opponent of the plant criticized the developer's role.

"It gives the public the appearance that there is more diversity of opinion than really exists," said Mary Booth, senior analyst with the Massachusetts Environmental Energy Alliance, a group against large-scale wood-burning, or biomass, plants. "It raises questions about their credibility."

Developers' involvement in the creation of community-based support groups has become so common that such groups have been nicknamed "astroturf" - for their fake grass-roots origin. "Astroturf" organizations have been discovered in recent years trying to get a liquefied natural gas plant built in Boston and a wind farm constructed in Vermont.

Proposed five years ago, the Russell plant has seen the approval process dragged out in large part over some residents' concerns about traffic, pollution, and harm to the region's expanse of forests.

Tired of opponents dominating the public conversation, Russell First! members said a small group began talking among themselves to spread the word about the plant's benefits, such as jobs and taxes, to the community of under 2,000 people.

“We really think this is a good project,” said Ann Merritt, a member of Russell First!

John Bos, a spokesman for Russell Biomass, said several citizens approached him and asked for help in supporting the plant. He searched the Internet and found Avakian.

“Yes, we helped . . . but the motivation, energy, and the desire to form a citizens group came first from these people,” said Bos.

Joel Gagne, an Avakian consultant, said in an e-mail that he worked for Russell Biomass until April.

Joyce Platt, a key player in Russell First!, said she remembers a speaker coming from Boston to school her and other biomass plant supporters, but said she did not recall exactly who he represented.

Merritt, however, said, “It’s fair to say they [Avakian] helped get it organized.” But she said the group is legitimate and it was “unfortunate” that the consultant created the website.

“All [Gagne] really said was if you don’t be strong and go after the opposition . . . they will win. But we have people who have walked in off the street. We are a local group,” Merritt said.

Derrick Mason, a Russell First! member who is now revamping the website, said both sides are lobbying and getting support for their cause where they can. He said he objects to the Russell First! group’s being characterized as the lackey of a consultant firm. “We are a totally grass-roots organization,” he said.

Since Gagne’s meeting, Bos said Russell First! has done outreach on its own, although Russell Biomass has paid postage for the group’s mailings.

Although the biomass developer is now open about its involvement with Russell First!, it did not disclose its financial support for the group’s organization in an article published in June in The Republican newspaper of Springfield, which reported that Russell First! was working to get the plant built.

“Naturally we are thrilled,” Bos said in the article. “I knew that this was kind of coming because there’s a number of people who just wanted the process to continue.”

Beth Daley can be reached at bdaley@globe.com. ■