

By EMILY STOUDE

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The Williams County Alliance met Tuesday night to hear speaker Thomas Linzey of Pennsylvania give them suggestions on how to make their voices heard.

Mr. Linzey is executive director of the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund (CELDF) in Chambersburg, Pa. He has been admitted to the United States Supreme Court, was a candidate for the Pennsylvania Attorney General in 2000, and in 2004 he received the Pennsylvania Farmer's Union Legislative Award.

Mr. Linzey has past experience in the work that the Williams County Alliance is trying to do. He has represented over 300 community organizations through a non-profit law firm he co-founded, the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund.

Mr. Linzey was sought out to help protect these communities from what he called "an assault" by corporations that wanted to locate factory farms — commonly called Confined Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs). Among the cases Mr. Linzey worked on were a 10,000-15,000-head hog farm and a toxic waste incinerator.

"Our idea of a community doesn't include a 10,000 head hog factory farm," said Mr. Linzey of his clients' opinions about CAFOs. "It doesn't square with what a community is supposed to be."

Mr. Linzey told the Williams County Alliance stories about how people in the communities threatened by these corporations are powerless.

"From birth we are taught that majorities of people within the community should have the say about what happens in that community," he said. "The tragic and horrifying state is that we don't."

The problem, according to Mr. Linzey, is that if the corporations with plans to locate in a community have a legal use in the state's eyes, then the community has no authority over its choice of municipality. Under the structure of law, the corporation's rights are — in essence, he said — more than that of the local community.

Mr. Linzey said that when he began working with grassroots community organizations, he found that fighting the permits the corporations were trying to get approval for was the only viable option. He said that the problem with this route was that it involved only fighting the permits, and didn't address changing the structure of how CAFOs are approved.

"When small towns are pointing out the problem with the permits from the corporations, they are actually doing the work for the corporation by helping it pass quicker rather than slowing it down," he said. Every problem brought to light is a problem a CAFO can fix on the way to approval, Mr. Linzey explained.

The Williams County Alliance needs to choose who is going to decide what happens in the community, he said — the corporations or the local residents. “The regulatory system is not broken,” he said. “It is working very well because it keeps us busy chasing our tails trying to keep the corporations out.”

He explained that a municipality has more power than a township. In Williams County’s case, he said, it would be best to come together as a whole county. “We are supposed to be self-governing people,” he said of local democracy. Williams County Alliance chair Sherry Fleming agreed.

“This is going to involve a lot of education,” said Mrs. Fleming of Mr. Linzey’s advice. “It’s an opportunity for the county to decide if they want to be the ones to make the decisions for their community.”

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