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Executive Editor

David takes on industrial Goliath

Nuclear power is a mystery to most of us.

Then along comes something like the threat of a melt-down at a place called Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania, and we're forced to stretch our brains.

The world oil crisis, we find, has a strong bearing on our energy resources, which of course includes splitting atoms to generate electricity.

Jane Fonda's movie, "The China Syndrome," comes along and, if you'll excuse the phrasing, pours more fuel onto the fire.

It seemed appropriate to ask a couple of people what they think about the future of nuclear power, hard on the heels of the Pennsylvania situation.

Shirley Marthey, communications coordinator for the West Bloomfield School District, admitted, "I don't know or understand from the technical standpoint (what nuclear power is) and I feel concerned about the people around there (Three Mile Island). But with the great energy problem (the United States faces), we have to explore every avenue."

She added, "My reaction on a gut level is sympathy and horror. I wonder how much the people with this Pandora's box know what they're doing. There are differences of opinion between the experts in Washington and those at the power plant."

ANOTHER AREA RESIDENT, Liana Berberic, manager of the Rochester Varsity sporting goods shop, said her knowledge of nuclear power is limited. She agrees the nation "should explore it, do a lot of research, and keep it so it's safe."

The critics of nuclear power are a lot less charitable toward those who believe the future of energy rides with the atom.

Since the accident in Pennsylvania, they've been redoubling their efforts.

Quite by coincidence, Detroit Edison Co. officials will be facing one of those critics at the annual shareholders' meeting April 23 in Henry and Edsel Ford Auditorium in Detroit.

He's 26-year-old David A. DeVarti, of Ann Arbor.

After a gentle tug and haul, David was able to get Edison to include his anti-nuclear proposal in the company's official meeting notice booklet.

It opens, "We recommend that energy needs be met by methods other than nuclear power."

The proposal goes on to point out primarily cost factors for abandoning the atom.

IN A TELEPHONE conversation with DeVarti, I asked him if this was his only objection. He said, "No, but my two friends who helped me write the proposal and I had to settle on one point. The company said we could only use 200 words." (There were 218 by my count.)

Frank M. Kehoe, secretary of Edison, confirmed the fact that the Securities and Exchange Commission had to set a limit on shareholder proposal writing and 200 was it.



Kehoe confirmed that the company's printed response was lengthier (845 words by my count), but "it was not a long response considering the question."

He also pointed out that if a majority of the 65.9 million shares favor the proposal, it would then be submitted to the board of directors as a recommendation from the shareholders — but only a recommendation.

DeVarti, who owns six shares, has a goal of capturing votes of three million. There's a specific reason. If he gets 3 percent of the total shares, SEC rules the question automatically must be considered the following year.

Proxy voting is presently taking place.

DeVarti reports that the incident on Three Mile Island seems to have stimulated interest in his proposal.

He said several letters arrived and calls came from New York, Chicago and Washington. One man said he was phoning from Hawaii, but David said he sorts of doubts that.

ONE WOMAN TOLD DeVarti that she initially intended to vote against his proposal. After learning about the situation in Middletown, she was thinking of switching her vote in favor.

Talking with DeVarti, I learned he worked for some 10 years with his dad, who owns Dominick's restaurant in Ann Arbor. But last fall, differences arose between the father and son, prompting David to leave the business.

He had been doing volunteer work with PIRGIM (Public Interest Research Group in Michigan), and this week the group put him on the payroll. David is being paid \$3.75 per hour.

DAVID IS TAKING ON the industrial Goliath because he "is not willing to accept that (nuclear) plants are safe. I had swallowed the industry line on safety, but the stuff is so dangerous. Looking at Harrisburg has made me re-evaluate."

Kehoe noted that usually about 650 people attend Edison's annual shareholders' meeting, but he's not certain "whether the proposal will generate more attendance."

The soft-spoken DeVarti said he has endorsements from several groups and the promise of proxies for nearly 1,200 shares. The latter include his brother's (120), his dad's (150), a cousin's (600), plus the people who have called him.

David said that if nuclear power can be curtailed, maybe the slack can be picked up by hydro dams, similar to the ones Edison once operated along the Huron River, and windmills along Lake Michigan.

He also is concerned that when nuclear plants run their anticipated cycle of 40 to 50 years, they're going to have to be decommissioned — and that can be expensive.

Eldon Alexanderson, director of Edison's nuclear engineering department located in Troy, speaks to this point.

He said there are accepted methods of "decommissioning" atomic plants. In fact, Alexanderson was involved when Edison's Fermi I was "decommissioned and mobilized", leaving no accessible radiation. Any low-level portions left gradually "decay away," he said.

The cost was \$7 million, Alexanderson said.

When asked about Three Mile Island, the Edison nuclear expert said his knowledge so far came mainly from what he read in newspapers and saw on television.

"Things are pretty well straightened away. If nothing more happens, it (the result of the incident) will be mainly a lot of frightened people," Alexanderson said.

It will be interesting to see how the discussion in Ford Auditorium proceeds come April 23.

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