

## **COMMENTARY: County Board mishandled permit for Jennie-O**

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By Laura Krebsbach  
Socially Responsible Agricultural Project

The outcome of the Meeker County Commissioners' September 16<sup>th</sup> meeting on a conditional use permit by large-scale turkey facility operator Jennie-O -- located at 31570 518 Avenue, Grove City -- is unfortunately more the rule than the exception across the country. The Commissioners voted to increase the facility's footprint to allow construction of huge new turkey barns north of the existing location. End of story.

I worked with a group of citizens that live closest to the existing facility. With the help of my organization, the Socially Responsible Agricultural Project, these local citizens raised important issues with the Commissions related to legal and engineering matters. The problems include: 1) all documents for the permit were not made available to the public, including a late submission by the applicant after the legal deadline; 2) an engineering review of the applicant's plan showing glaring errors, mistakes and omissions; and 3) a direct conflict of interest by two zoning board members.

The conflict of interest relates to the fact that two members of the zoning board have financial and other relationships with Jennie-O. Even though the County Attorney agreed there was a conflict, he did not advise the Commissioners to send the permit back to the zoning board and complete the process with those two members abstaining. The neighbors of Jennie-O would like to know why.

It's standard procedure that when a conflict of interest exists, those with the conflict abstain from the vote, and any discussion or debate, to preserve the fairness of the process. This did not happen in Meeker County. Instead the conflict was accepted and ignored -- not only doing a disservice to public participation and good government, but also creating a violation of law. If this situation was handled properly, there could have been a completely different outcome.

The identified technical problems with the permit application were likewise ignored by the zoning board. They include the presence of flooded lands and the presence of muck soils associated with long-term ponding and flooding. Additionally, the application's drawings were not signed by a professional engineer and lacked basic information about stormwater design. The Muskogean muck soils that occur at the location of stormwater controls is of utmost concern to the experienced engineer who reviewed the Jennie-O application.

Local boards have a duty to the citizens of their county to uphold and abide by the law. In this case, and sadly most cases I've worked on with local citizens, the interests of mega industrial animal confinements win out. Promises of economic development, preserved property values, odor control and an increase in tax income are a fantasy that never comes true. There are peer-reviewed studies that refute each of these claims, along with studies by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control showing the future holds adverse health effects to those living in close proximity to these facilities. In the case of Meeker County, resident Shannon Johnson's three small children will be at-risk for developing asthma along with a number of other health problems.

The Commissioners and zoning board chose to ignore citizen concerns and fact-based science in favor of rubber-stamping the growth of unhealthy and environmentally harmful corporate interests. It happens in many places around this nation. This time it's happening in Meeker County, and it should not. This

community's local leaders need to put the well-being and the rights of its people first. Presumably, that's why they were elected. To improve lives, not endanger them.

*Laura Krebsbach is a regional paralegal representative of the [Socially Responsible Agricultural Project](#). Copies of the documents submitted to the Meeker County Commissioners are part of the public record and are available at your courthouse or by request at [lurak@sraproject.org](mailto:lurak@sraproject.org).*