

# Indian Point: A Power Plant Primer

*Is the nearby nuclear facility a vital energy source or potential disaster?*

BY NANCY A. SHENKER

**I** admit my scientific and political ignorance.

Before I started researching this article, I knew very little about Indian Point other than that it is potentially dangerous and highly controversial. I knew even less about nuclear energy.

Yet over the past few years, I have received numerous notices sent home from school about evacuation plans and potassium chloride, and I sometimes get invitations to fundraisers and protests.

As one of my neighbors expressed quite simply, "It's something I just prefer not to think about."

The following is a primer of the some of the facts, figures and points of view surrounding Indian Point.

After reading it, you may be compelled to get involved in the issues. You may become more educated about the facts and in a better position to join discussions. Or you might simply skip through the rest of the article and "prefer not to think about it."

## What is Nuclear Energy?

Nuclear power plants provide about 17 percent of the world's electricity. In these plants, atoms (such as uranium) are split in a controlled environment, releasing heat that is converted into electricity. For a more detailed explanation of how nuclear plants work, go to <http://people.howstuffworks.com/nuclear-power.htm>.



Sharon Katz

The use of nuclear power is controversial because of the unsolved problem of storing radioactive waste indefinitely, the potential for severe radioactive contamination by accident or sabotage, and the possibility that its use will lead to the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

More than 400 nuclear power plants exist around the world. Nuclear power supplies about 15 percent of the electricity in the United States (which has 100 plants), but some states get more power from nuclear plants than others. New York State has six reactors in four locations.

## What Goes on at Indian Point?

The Indian Point facility is located in Buchanan, New York, about 35 miles north of Manhattan. Westchester residents can find the approximate distance between their homes and Indian Point with the handy calculator on the county's Indian Point web site (see sidebar).

Indian Point is operated by Entergy Nuclear, the second-largest nuclear operator in the country. At the plant in Buchanan, 2000 megawatts of electricity is generated around the clock, providing between 20 and 40 percent of the electricity for the lower Hudson Valley, which includes Chappaqua.

## What's the Danger?

Three main issues arise in the discussion of the safety of the Indian Point plant: the disposal of used fuel rods, the security of the plant itself, and the quality and practicality of the current evacuation plan.

According to Lisa Rainwater van Suntum, the Indian Point Campaign director for Riverkeeper, the current means of disposing of spent fuel rods poses a risk to both the environment and to our community's safety. "Nuclear experts say that the current containment plan is not sufficient for our post-9/11 world. The National Academy of Sciences found that 1500 tons of radioactive waste is currently at the Indian Point site."

Riverkeeper, Inc., is an environmental organization focused on safeguarding the ecological integrity of the Hudson River and protecting the watershed of the river, which is the drinking supply of more than 8 million residents of New York City. Riverkeeper first became involved in studying Indian Point's impact on

*The biggest issue facing Chappaqua residents is finding alternative energy sources before a determination can be made to close Indian Point. Chappaqua residents need to work together with local and state officials to find alternative energy sources that are safe and cost-efficient.*

**Elise Kessler Mottel, New Castle Town Board member**

the environment—but following the 9/11 attacks, they became active in opposing the nuclear facility.

Entergy, on the other hand, is confident that these fuel rods do not pose a danger to our community.

“They are buried 27 feet below the ground, surrounded by solid bedrock,” Larry Gottlieb, director of communications for Entergy Nuclear Northeast, said. “The fuel pool, inside that, is surrounded by six feet of concrete.”

Currently, no practical plan exists for removing these rods to another location. The Department of Energy is in the process of creating a nuclear disposal facility at Yucca Mountain, Nevada, but that project has faced its own set of issues.

As Gottlieb points out, even the process for moving the rods would be complex, since a special transport plan would need to be developed.

Terrorist attacks are on everyone’s mind. Many believe that Indian Point, because of its easy accessibility by air and water, make it an ideal target, and Rainwater contends that the site does not have proper military protection.

Gottlieb said that, in the past, most of Indian Point’s security staff were former police officers and security guards. Entergy is currently drawing

more of its guards from the military. Now, a large percentage of the guards, Gottlieb said, have a military or law enforcement background.

“We have several hundred guards. It’s one of the largest security forces in New York State,” he said. “We conduct what we call ‘force-on-force’ exercises with laser-equipped vests and weapons to simulate real combat.”

Despite the many precautions, what would happen if a nuclear incident occurred—either as a result of a terrorist attack or human error?

An emergency response plan for our community has been developed and has itself become the center of much debate and controversy.

Gottlieb asserted that in the case of an “incident,” the plant can be shut down in less than 2 seconds. “An event at Indian Point could not possibly result in a 360-degree mushroom cloud. We do not use weapons grade fuel in the plant.”

Nancy Syrop, a Chappaqua resident and mother of three boys, has been actively involved in researching the current evacuation plan, and along with other community members, has marshaled the support of 150 residents to form CHANGE, Chappaqua Against Nuclear Energy at Indian Point.

In 2002 Governor Pataki announced that New York State commissioned an independent review by James Lee Witt Associates to evaluate Indian Point’s off-site emergency plan. The report pointed out flaws in the current plan, and Syrop has been actively involved in lobbying legislators not to approve it.

“I always knew that Indian Point was in my backyard,” Syrop said. “After 9/11 I decided to get more involved in dealing with issues that affect my family.”

## **So, What Can YOU Do?**

A movement is underway to “decommission” Indian Point when its license comes up for renewal in 2013.

Although this sounds like a simple answer, a realistic plan for alternative energy sources does not yet exist. Riverkeeper supports Westchester County’s proposal for conversion of the site to a natural

gas facility. Gottlieb said that this would entail the construction of two new pipelines, which would certainly face community opposition.

Rainwater van Suntum said existing pipelines have been shown to be sufficient.

Additionally, the issue of spent rod disposal would remain.

But energy conservation appears to be one concept that all the factions involved in this issue agree on.

The Indian Point Safe Energy Coalition (IPSEC), a group that works to close Indian Point, has launched a pledge program, whereby New Yorkers can commit to saving 2000 megawatts of electricity. Practical tips can be found on the Department of Energy’s web site (see sidebar).

County Executive Andy Spano and County Legislator Michael Kaplowitz, along with Legislator

## **Basic Information**

### **Understanding Nuclear Power**

<http://people.howstuffworks.com/nuclear-power.htm>

### **Yucca Mountain**

<http://www.ocrwm.doe.gov/ymp/about/index.shtml>

### **Evacuation Plan**

<http://giswww.westchestergov.com/wcgis/indianpoint/locatormap.htm>

### **Witt Report**

<http://www.wittassociates.com/search.xml>

## **Energy Conservation**

<http://www.eere.energy.gov/>

<http://www.getenergysmart.org/GES.portal>

## **Community Groups**

### **Riverkeeper**

<http://riverkeeper.org/>

### **Indian Point Safe Energy Coalition**

<http://www.ipsecinfo.org/>

### **CHANGE**

e-mail [KDF105@aol.com](mailto:KDF105@aol.com)

### **Entergy**

<http://www.safesecurevital.org/>

Martin Rogowsky, are seeking proposals from energy consultants as the next step in the effort to close the Indian Point's nuclear plants and replace them with an alternative energy source.

Governor Pataki has called for a 6 percent increase in "green energy" by 2013. However, the location of alternative solutions like wind farms has come under attack, since upstate New York residents claim these structures can be noisy.

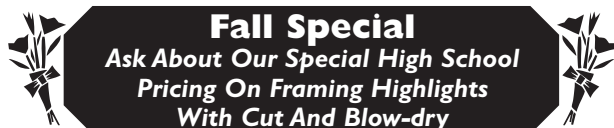
Despite the complexity and controversies surrounding Indian Point, one thing is certain. After I finished writing this article, I remembered to turn off the light as I left my office.

NANCY A. SHENKER is a freelance writer and business consultant (owner of the ONswitch) who lives in Chappaqua.

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- Pomco
- ICM (Magnacare) - (PPO, HMO, COMP, NF)
- Platinum Benefits
- Cigna
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