

The lay of the land

Seitel collects data by placing geophones — breadbox-sized devices attached to a tangle of wires — 220 feet from one another and measuring the vibrations coming from small, underground explosions or from the vibroseis trucks that pound the ground.

Communities involved in the conflict with the company — Hopewell, Shippingport, Greene, Center and Potter — were worried about the impact of the vibrations on the region's older homes and public infrastructure.

In Aliquippa, Mr. Walker's immediate concern is the city's old infrastructure — water pipelines that date to the 1800s. Longer term, Mr. Walker is looking at how to usher the faded industrial powerhouse through a new industrial boom. The expectation that Royal Dutch Shell will build a sprawling petrochemical complex in nearby Potter reverberates throughout conversations about the area's future.

"The good thing is, the cracker plant's coming," he said. "The bad thing is, the cracker plant's coming."

It's still unclear where or if operators might drill in the townships covered by Seitel's survey.

Range Resources, a Texas company that has been the most active in leasing oil and gas rights in that region, estimates most of Beaver County falls into the richest gas pocket of the Utica Shale. It also holds promise for good Marcellus Shale and Upper Devonian wells, so to the extent that all three layers could be developed, the region is among the richest spots in Pennsylvania, Range's estimates show.

The company has leased more than 9,000 acres in Hanover, Independence and Raccoon townships.

Range spokesman Matt Pitzarella said he's unaware that Seitel has been having issues with the townships, even though Range is a client of the company.

"It's not uncommon for townships that are newly hosting development to have some ups and downs as they iron out their process and better understand the industry," Mr. Pitzarella said. "We enjoy very positive working relationships in the townships where we work and those relationships have strengthened over the years."

Oklahoma-based Chesapeake Energy Corp., which has also leased acreage in the area, declined to comment.