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Progress Energy could add 2 nuclear reactors

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Raleigh-based Progress Energy submitted a long-awaited application to the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission Tuesday that outlined potential plans to add two nuclear reactors to its Shearon Harris Nuclear Power Plant in Wake County.

The NRC, which is reviewing five applications nationwide, requires up to three years to review applications, said Roger Hannah, NRC public affairs officer.

After two years of planning, the application contains extensive environmental analysis, security information and technical specifications, said Progress Energy spokesman Rick Kimble.

"We're not even sure if we will build the plant," Kimble said. "This is a very long process because nuclear has a very long lead time. We want to keep our options open."

Progress Energy's consideration of additional nuclear energy comes as part of a three-pronged plan to increase energy efficiency and the use of alternative energy sources in the long term.

Because of increasing population and energy needs in the Triangle, additional nuclear plants might be the most viable option to provide the set amount of so-called "baseline power," which must be available at all times during the day, Kimble said.

"We don't think we'll be building coal for a really long time, and we don't think that (natural) gas is the answer either because of the volatility of the price of gas," he said.

"Nuclear is the most environmentally friendly alternative out there. There's no carbon emissions whatsoever, and that's a huge plus."

The new plants would feature the latest Westinghouse AP1000 reactor model, which significantly simplifies the plant's design, reduces its cost and offers more reliable safety technology, compared with older models.

The review process will include a public comment period, safety reviews, a two-part environmental review, a public hearing with a three-judge panel to review issues raised by residents and extensive evaluation by the NRC.

While residents of New Hill are used to the existing reactor, the prospect of additional reactors is causing concern, said Paul Barth, president of the New Hill Community Association Inc.

"Two new reactors will put us at additional risk as the years go on and triple the risk of something going wrong," he said.

Barth added that the plant's construction and changes to the area's infrastructure would be a major inconvenience for residents, as would possible flooding from Harris Lake, which would need to be raised 20

feet to cool the extra reactors.

Residents will discuss the proposal during a meeting in March.

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