MOUNT PLEASANT, Texas - State hearings on permits for new TXU Corp. coal-fired power plants kicked off Monday to a standing-room-only crowd of local residents and politicians, Austin environmentalists and Dallas Mayor Laura Miller.

The state began hearings Monday on two TXU plant expansions, in Mount Pleasant and in Henderson. The office will hold a third hearing Tuesday in Fairfield about another expansion.

The Dallas power company wants to build 11 new coal-fired power plant units in Texas. Those plants require air permits from the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

The hearings that began Monday will allow administrative law judges to hear objections from local people to the plant expansions, and to recommend whether the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality should permit the plants. The process will take six months.

Ecological, local issues

The process has attracted attention from environmentalists and elected officials across the state and has created friction within these rural communities.

"People think they should be able to have the plants and the jobs, and the clean air, too," said Max Shumake, a member of the Sulphur River Oversight Society, who attended the Mount Pleasant hearing.

TXU officials say that's exactly what their plan offers; the company says it will clean up the pollution from the existing plants while building the new ones, and cut total emissions 20 percent.

But people who live here disagree on whether to trust TXU to keep the air clean, or to publicly oppose the hometown employer and demand it install more expensive pollution controls.

Ms. Miller fanned the debate during the past couple of weeks when she asked town councils and county commissioners near the plant sites to join her Texas Clean Air Cities Coalition. The coalition is calling for TXU to use cleaner technology and for state environmental officials to slow down the permitting process and consider more carefully the total impact of all of the proposed coal plants.

Growing coalition

Three East Texas towns joined the coalition: Mount Vernon, Streetman and Uncertain.

That's important because, without local members, the coalition might not be allowed to participate in the plant hearings when actual testimony begins in January. With those three towns, Ms. Miller expects to have standing in each of the hearings that began this week for three new plants.

Whether the coalition may participate in each case is up to the administrative law judges.

On Monday in Mount Pleasant, Judge Kerry Sullivan heard from lawyers representing Ms. Miller's coalition, as well as lawyers with the Sierra Club and Environmental Defense, which would also like to participate.

Judge Sullivan will decide in coming days which parties may participate.

Some individuals also asked to be parties to the case. Most of them objected to the pollution from the plants for health reasons.

Objections to witnesses

TXU lawyers, with law firm Vinson & Elkins, objected to nearly everyone who wanted to participate in the case, sometimes on the grounds that the person lives too far away from the plant or that the person isn't affected by the plant in any special way.

Eventually, the audience began to groan when a TXU lawyer said, "I object."
"These guys are killing me," Ms. Miller said, with a chuckle.

But some local people are annoyed that the mayor of Dallas is involved at all.

They think their own elected officials should handle coal plant issues.

"Until Ms. Miller came along, it was good news" that TXU might expand the plants, said Tom Ramsay, a real estate agent in Mount Vernon and a former state representative. "She stirred the pot."

Mr. Ramsay was one of dozens of people Monday in Mount Pleasant wearing a TXU button that said "Reliable, Clean, Affordable, New Jobs." He said he thinks TXU is listening to Ms. Miller.

The company sent community relations officials to most of the city councils Ms. Miller visited.