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Jobs, environment at core of coal debate

Speakers discuss the pros and cons of shipping the fuel source through Eugene

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Job creation and environmental concerns moved to center stage in the coal train debate that took place before the Eugene City Council on Monday evening.

Councilors were the intended audience because the elected body in two weeks will vote on a resolution opposing the potential shipment of coal through Eugene to a yet-to-be developed export terminal at Coos Bay.

But the discussion also drew a full house of supporters and opponents to the Bascom-Tykeson Room in the downtown library. About two dozen people later testified before the council on the issue — most but not all in favor of the resolution — and a couple dozen coal train protesters marched to the library prior to the council meeting.

The coastal city of Coos Bay is among a handful of Oregon and Washington communities that could build shipping terminals to handle a projected 150 million tons of coal annually for export to Asian electricity producers.

Coal export terminal supporters — Port of Coos Bay Chief Executive David Koch and Reedsport Mayor Keith Tymchuk — and two opponents — Ross Macfarlane of Climate Solutions and Andy Harris of Physicians for Social Responsibility — addressed the council at the invitation of Mayor Kitty Piercy.

Tymchuk and Koch told councilors that the \$250 million export terminal and \$180 million in improvements to the port-owned rail line between Eugene and the coast would provide critically needed jobs to coastal communities and beyond.

In some coast area schools, 75 percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunches, they said.

The coast economy has been depressed since the timber industry downturn that began in the 1980s, Tymchuk said, and the “great recession is cutting us to the bone. We need family wage jobs.”

Macfarlane and Harris, however, elaborated on the environmental concerns from the transport and burning of coal, including possible health effects from coal dust blowing off train cars to coal emissions contributing to climate change.

The 150 million tons of coal burned in Asia would produce the same amount of greenhouse gas emissions each year as the emissions from all vehicle use in the western United States, Macfarlane said.

“This is a very risky and poor strategy for economic development,” he said.

But Koch said that, in addition to the construction and permanent jobs created by the export of coal, the project would help the port improve the rail line between Eugene and Coos Bay. The line needs \$90 million in repairs and upgrades to remain operational. While the port has raised \$30 million in state and federal funding for tunnel, bridge and track repairs, it needs private investment for the remaining amount.

“As a result, the only choice that we have is to either pursue private investment in the rail line or to, instead, watch it deteriorate until we are forced to abandon it,” he said. “For the port and the communities served by the Coos Bay Rail Link, that is no choice at all.”

Eugene is one of several Northwest cities that have either passed or are considering resolutions opposed to coal shipments.

Harris said the issue should not be framed as jobs versus the environment. “All of us support job growth, but not at the expense of the high quality of life, which we value so highly in Oregon,” he said.

The resolution was introduced by southeast Councilor Alan Zelenka, who said a comprehensive environmental review should be done on the export of coal, something that has been called for by Gov. John Kitzhaber and U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore.

“This just isn’t about Coos Bay,” Zelenka said. “This is a larger issue about big coal in the entire Northwest.”

The resolution would direct city attorneys to research whether the city could use state and federal public health and safety laws to prevent the transport of coal in its boundaries.

But it’s unclear whether Eugene would have authority to prevent coal shipments.

The Surface Transportation Board, the federal agency that regulates railroads, has said that state and local governments “cannot enact laws which would significantly interfere with railroad operations, such as prohibiting the movement of trains on an existing rail line.”

Southwest Councilor Chris Pryor told the speakers that the issue is difficult because it appears to be a clash between important goals — environmental stewardship and job creation. “It’s a classic collision of values where none of the values are wrong,” he said. “You are all saying true things.”

“This is a very risky and poor strategy for economic development.”

— ROSS MACFARLANE,
CLIMATE SOLUTIONS

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