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County delays coal issue decision

Lane commissioners want input from the public but stop short of calling for a hearing

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Saying the public hasn't had enough time to weigh in, Lane County commissioners have delayed consideration of a resolution supporting a Coos Bay cargo terminal to handle coal shipped through Eugene by train.

People interested in the issue will be able to comment at the next two Board of Commissioners meetings, on Oct. 16 in Florence and Oct. 17 in Eugene. The resolution will come up for board discussion and a possible vote at the Eugene meeting.

However, commissioners at their Wednesday meeting opted against holding a public hearing or work session on the issue. Instead, people who want to comment are invited to do so during the public comment period that precedes every board meeting.

All five commissioners supported the two-week delay. Board Chairman Sid Leiken noted that because of county staff cuts, information on the resolution was not posted to the board's website until later Tuesday, giving people little notice that the topic was up for consideration the next morning.

But two commissioners objected to limiting comments to the public comment period, in which people can address the board on any issue. That period generally is limited to 20 minutes total with individual speakers limited to three minutes each, although the total time can be extended and the three-minute limit is the same as at public hearings.

Still, Commissioner Pete Sorenson pushed for a public hearing, saying that's a better way to handle an issue that has generated such intense interest. Commissioner Rob Handy agreed.

"We should have a public hearing," Handy said. "This is an item of high interest not only to this community but all up and down the West Coast."

He also said the project should undergo an "alternatives assessment" that focuses on how to do the least amount of damage possible rather than determining how much damage can be done while still being safe.

He said the public's values have shifted away from consumerism and toward more local priorities.

"The things we have done in the past and the assumptions need to be challenged," Handy said. "Polling regularly shows that folks value community and public health over consumption, and we need to look at the impacts of that."

The board's other three commissioners, however, did not support a public hearing and said they are comfortable hearing comments during the public comment period.

Commissioner Jay Bozievich said researching issues and making decisions is what the voters elect them to do.

"I don't think it rises to the need for a public hearing," he said. "I think all the information is out there."

Only one person signed up to address board members at the start of Wednesday's meeting, perhaps attesting to the short notice given for the topic. John Jordan-Cascade, of the group Beyond Toxics, urged the board to look not only at the economic benefits from jobs and construction but also the economic damage from coal dust.

He said crops along the route of coal trains, which would carry coal from Rocky Mountain states to West Coast ports, could be coated with coal dust that doesn't easily wash off.

The economic effect of coal dust on agriculture should be studied, he said, and he asked the commissioners to support efforts by some federal legislators to seek a wide-ranging environmental impact study of the trains before allowing shipments.

"There are health considerations, but there are economic considerations as well," he said.

The resolution before commissioners doesn't address the coal trains but instead is focused on support for a proposed bulk cargo terminal at the Port of Coos Bay that would store and load coal onto ships bound for Asia. Three companies are negotiating to build the terminal at an estimated cost of \$250 million, and another \$182 million to upgrade the rail line between Eugene and Coos Bay, with the coal to be shipped to South Korea to be burned for electricity.

But support for the terminal is deemed implicit support for the coal trains that would be required to make the terminal financially viable. Four other West Coast ports also are under consideration for coal export facilities: Boardman and the Astoria area in Oregon, and Longview and Bellingham in Washington.

The plan to mine coal from the Powder River basin in Wyoming and Montana and ship it to Asia through West Coast ports has drawn intense interest. The plan is supported by a variety of business and labor groups and opposed by a broad coalition of environmental and health groups with legislators and public officials lining up on both sides.

Opponents cite the potential health damage from coal dust blowing off the 135-car trains that would take the product to port, the environmental damage and increased global warming from

burning the coal, the further damage and disruption of multiple trainloads passing through towns and cities every day, and the danger of coal train derailments as among the reasons for blocking the shipments.

They say that when the costs of the damage are factored in, the proposal not only does not provide a net economic benefit but results in higher costs to the public.

Proponents, however, say the health and environmental effects have been overblown and that the trains and port terminal, which would be financed privately, would provide good-paying jobs and valuable infrastructure improvements and boost local government revenue.

They also say dust can be controlled, trains would not block intersections for more than five minutes at a time and trains are the least-polluting and least-expensive way to ship bulk cargo.

The debate is taking place in local communities where the trains would pass through, as well as at state and federal levels. Eugene's City Council will take up the subject again on Monday.

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