

Commissioners say no to nukes

Unanimous decision extinguishes nuclear power plant plan.

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Commissioners say no to nukes By PETER STRESCINO | pstress@chieftain.com | 14 comments

In the end, the official rejection of a possible nuclear energy plant in Pueblo came down to something simple but of supreme importance: water.

The Pueblo County commissioners voted 3-0 Monday to deny the use of 24,000 acres in the eastern county for a clean energy park, which the major component — the only one people talked about — was a nuclear power plant.

A surprisingly sparse crowd, maybe about 100 people at the Sangre de Cristo Arts and Conference Center ballroom, listened and several applauded when the commissioners denied local lawyer Don Banner his application to change the use of the land from agricultural to one that could support the energy park.

So ended an impassioned, short period in Pueblo that pitted many against the plan and saw Banner, the man who is most credited with building a new YMCA here, vilified and praised by people of two distinct political viewpoints.

After the vote, Banner said he would not appeal the decision but "respectfully disagreed" with it.

Banner said people were "stirred up" over headlines from Japan, where that country's nuclear energy program took a hit from a giant earthquake and resulting tsunami last month.

"I think the decision (by commissioners) was made independently of that," he said of the Japan tragedy. "People know these plants are now as safe as they humanly can be, but they get stirred up, don't do research and just react to headlines."

He said another Colorado community has asked him to research a nuclear facility for it, but wasn't sure he will keep trying. He would not say which community had approached him.

Before the commissioners voted, land-use attorney Gary Raso pointed out some findings and recommendations to the board, which were not binding. They included the vague plans Banner had presented; the lack of information about the quantity of water needed for operation and emergency purposes; an unclear financial picture; and that there is no clear solution on what to do with spent nuclear fuel rods.

Commissioner Anthony Nunez said he was all for economic development, but that new nuclear production has essentially stopped and the cost associated with the plants caused coal to be a more efficient way to produce energy.

"And how much water would be needed just to run the plant, never mind if there was an emergency," he said.

Commissioner John Cordova said he was convinced there would be no earthquake the size of the one that hit Japan, and of course no tsunami. But he worried about spent fuel rods.

"Would we have to store them forever?" he asked.

Commissioner Jeff Chostner, who is a friend of Banner's and has been associated with him in legal practice, called Banner a fine man who has the public's interest at heart. Chostner then gave a brief rundown of the country's wars over oil and said too much blood and treasure has been wasted on the diminishing resource.

"But (his reason for voting no) is water," Chostner said. "From an operational need to emergencies there are differing figures (about how much will be needed). We say we have enough water for a city of 350,000, but these energy uses (including the current power plants here) bring that down to enough for 300,000 people. That's a chunk to take out of agriculture. And the last resort if we needed water for an emergency would be the Pueblo Reservoir. The county does not own a drop of that water."

Chostner continued, "I think we need to race to find alternative energy sources. At some place, at some time, we need to make nuclear energy appropriate.

"This is not that place and it is not that time."

The Colorado chapter of the Sierra Club weighed in shortly after the vote.

"This is a victory for our environment and the health of future generations," said Joan Seeman, Sierra Club Rocky Mountain Chapter nuclear and toxics issue specialist. "Thank goodness Pueblo's civic leaders decided against expensive, dirty nuclear energy in our backyard. Pueblo has cheaper, cleaner energy sources available that can grow the local economy with good, green jobs and a broadened tax base."

Suzanne Morgan, a local real estate agent who was one of the leaders against the plant, was pleased with the outcome.

"The people have spoken," Morgan said. "(Banner's) application was vague and ambiguous, and would have given anyone who bought the land from Mr. Banner a blank check (to do what they wished with the land)."

Morgan said she was for more jobs and a growing economy, but to put a nuclear plant in Pueblo would be "irresponsible."

"Thank you county commissioners for putting people's lives in front of big business."

Banner, who displayed no rancor toward the decision or people who personally attacked him, was succinct in his final statement of the night.

"This was a short-sighted decision," Banner said. "And I am a visionary."

http://www.chieftain.com/news/local/commissioners-say-no-to-nukes/article_5a973794-6fcd-11e0-bab5-001cc4c03286.html