

Cascadia Weekly 06-08-11

THE GRISTLE

VIEWS EXPRESSED ARE NOT NECESSARILY THOSE OF
CASCADIA WEEKLY

‘SEA CHANGE,’ LIKE A TSUNAMI: The coal train boilers

exploded last week as two meetings drew hundreds to protest a proposal to build the West Coast’s largest coal export facility at Cherry Point. ReSources, the educational and advocacy group founded in Bellingham, brought environmental writer Bill McKibben to the Fairhaven Village Green to encourage a crowd in excess of 800 to activism on the issue. The following night, the Bellingham Municipal Courthouse was burst well beyond capacity as the mayor sought to receive public comments about the environmental scoping of the proposed Gateway Pacific Terminal project.

City staff estimate more than 500 people attended the COB event, and while the crossover attendance at both events were large, the city event drew unique numbers of residents concerned with the impacts of a project that could move as much as 56 million tons of coal through Bellingham each year.

Opposition to the project appeared to run about ten-to-one within the more diverse crowd and interests expressed at the COB event, even with organized Labor present. Importantly, large numbers took a position that the project should *not be accommodated in any way*, and urged the mayor to abandon the managerial stewardship he offered to assemble public comments on the scoping process and become their champion against the project. Perhaps the evening’s most devastating commentary

arrived from Bellingham’s physicians and health care providers, who cited numerous health and public safety hazards associated with the mining and transport of coal. The letter was signed by nearly 70 PeaceHealth physicians—ironically close to the number of people expected to be permanently employed by the coal facility, according to the applicant’s documents. One could honestly say that for nearly every person potentially employed by GPT,

there’s a local doctor concerned about it. Mayor Dan Pike read the electoral politics on display, and late last week announced, “By any calculation, the proposed coal-dependent terminal at Cherry Point does not add up.

“In the end,” Pike said, “it is my job as mayor to

protect Bellingham and protect it I will.”

His announcement drew immediate fire from the Bellingham/Whatcom County Chamber of Commerce and Industry, who criticized the mayor for giving heed to “the falsehoods and purposeful misinformation that are being forced upon our community by those who would use this issue to raise money for their organizations on the backs of the hard-working men and women of Bellingham and Whatcom County.” This, of course, from a donor-based organization that has rigorously opposed minimum-wage laws and worker safety standards.

“Frankly, the polite thing to do is to welcome them in, and engage in the process of reviewing the impacts of this project,” Chamber President Ken Oplinger said of Seattle-based SSA Marine and their proposed terminal. “If we find, through this state and federally mandated review process, that there are significant impacts which we feel cannot be adequately mitigated, then we should absolutely oppose this project at that time. Opposing it before that work has been completed is simply wrong.” Ignoring his caution of impartiality, Oplinger has strongly attached his name and support to the project.

SSA Marine has proven exceptionally adept at lining up official support—like Oplinger—of this project well in advance of its details. Pike was first to champion opposition.

There’s a simple reality at work with this project:

So long as everyone plays by the rules as they’re written, this project will be approved and permitted. The game of siting large-scale, unpopular projects is weighted to allow their siting despite their unpopularity. That’s the outcome the rules are designed to produce.

The governor continues to hold closed session meetings in Olympia between SSA Marine and her agency heads, organized as a Multi-Agency Permit Team (MAP). No outside organizations have been allowed to attend the sessions.

In April, Bellingham environmental lawyers sent a letter to the governor, herself once the head of the state Dept. of Ecology, critical of the manifest unfairness of this arrangement:

“A student of the process might conclude, sadly, that the exercise lacks perspective and grounding in reality, when it excludes the majority of affected jurisdictions, businesses, property

owners, and citizens along the affected transportation corridor. Public confidence can be restored in the (MAP) review if it is quickly revised to include a broader base, allowing these affected entities to participate in the discussion about project design, impacts, and scope of agency review to come. Without that change, this postapplication... review process behind closed doors seems skewed in favor of the applicant," they observed of "an agency environmental review process that is already pre-determined in many important respects."

Sensing a *fait accompli*, citizens urged the city's CEO to climb out of the role of referee and armor fully into the conflict. For a city like Bellingham, far ahead of many parts of the country in the understanding of sustainability and livable communities, of Peak Oil and energy challenges, and the impacts of the accelerated burning of fossil fuels on human health and the environment, the siting of the West Coast's largest coal export facility here takes on an enormous, unavoidable *moral* significance. Citizens, voters have invested their lives in support of this awareness. And from that perspective, at least, perhaps no community along the I-5 corridor is *less* suited to receive an industry of this kind. Yet there is no line, no criteria in an environmental impact statement to capture that: The soul is nontransferrable, the heart cannot be mitigated.