

Casper officials consider whether to endorse transbasin water diversion

Council hears pipeline pitch

By PETE NICKEAS - Star-Tribune staff writer | Posted: Wednesday, March 10, 2010 12:00 am

Two competing groups have tried to enlist Casper's support for their efforts to build a massive pipeline that would carry water from the Green River Basin to the eastern slopes of Colorado and Wyoming.

At odds are Aaron Million, a private investor who initiated work on the proposed pipeline, and a group of municipal governments that formed a coalition in response to Million's efforts.

Million has drawn the ire of local governments who fear a private pipeline would allow its owner to jack up water prices without oversight from any public body.

The Casper City Council heard from two of Million's representatives at Monday night's work session, after hearing from the group of municipal investors in February. At that meeting, the council agreed to set aside \$20,000 to help the municipal group study the pipeline's feasibility.

Though the city's water supply is considered safe and reliable, the council is looking 50 to 100 years out at projected water needs. Owning a piece of the water supply from the Green River Basin, which would be dumped into the North Platte River via Million or the other group's pipeline, would allow the city to account for future growth.

Million's plan would annually divert between 165,000 and 250,000 acre feet of water flowing through the Green River Basin, according to a memo provided to the council by Million's attorney, Steve Freudenthal. Each acre foot equals about 325,000 gallons.

By comparison, Casper uses between 12,000 and 13,000 acre feet of water each year, according to Public Utilities Manager David Hill.

Under Million's plan, Casper and other water districts would own the right to the water, and Million's pipeline would ship it from point A to point B. Water districts would be charged based on how far the water has to be pumped, said Jeff Fassett, former state engineer who is now working for Million.

"He's the highway. Our model is that the individual end users, including Casper, Cheyenne, Lake Hattie ... we believe you need to apply and obtain and secure and maintain your own water rights," Fassett said. "There's no reason for Mr. Million or anybody else to have control over the city's water supply."

Freudenthal said he decided to speak with the council after it agreed to spend money with the competing group -- and that Million didn't think Casper would be interested because it has other alternatives available.

"First, you have a good water supply. Second, there are other alternatives -- the expansion of Pathfinder (Reservoir) and wells that are not tributary to the North Platte [River]," Freudenthal said.

Council Vice President Paul Bertoglio and others repeatedly asked for a cost estimate, a request Freudenthal danced around without providing specifics. Bertoglio, an engineer by trade, said the costs of pumping water hundreds of miles through a pipe over a mountain could make the entire project cost prohibitive.

"In terms of what we're looking at -- the precision is so far off that I hesitate to go into that," Freudenthal said. "But the basic preposition at the far end is what potential users -- what's their second cheapest alternative? And our numbers come in well below those."

The money for the study set aside in February is now in limbo while the council members decide how they want to proceed.

None of the council members have questioned the need to plan long-term for the city's water supply, and the city hasn't committed to either party yet. For now, the city seems content "riding both horses" and seeing which group can piece together the best proposal.

Construction is still years away, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers still needs to complete an environmental impact study. A letter written by a district commander in the corps, provided to the council by Million's attorney, said the corps would only be doing one study.

Anyone interested in the water needs to let the Army Corps of Engineers know, Million's attorney said.

At this point, the city has four options: Endorse the public plan, endorse the private plan, do nothing, or send a letter to the Army Corps of Engineers expressing an interest in the environmental study without endorsing either plan. Before the city spends the \$20,000 it agreed to spend in February, the entire topic will likely be discussed at another work session, Bertoglio said.

At some point, the city could commit to one group or decide to not be involved with the process at all. The city of Cheyenne took a similar approach as Casper, Freudenthal said, by telling the corps it was interested in Million's project and also committing money to the municipal group's feasibility study.

Reach city reporter Pete Nickeas at pete.nickeas@trib.com or (307) 266-0639. Read more about Casper politics and government at <http://tribtown.trib.com/redtape>