

Rock Springs jumps in



The sun sets along the banks of the Flaming Gorge Reservoir in southwest Wyoming last week. Rock Springs city officials decided during a meeting Tuesday to join a coalition that aims to fight a proposal to divert water from the reservoir and move it by pipeline to Colorado's Front Range. (Jeff Gearino/Star-Tribune)

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ROCK SPRINGS -- With some reluctance, Rock Springs City Council members reversed course Tuesday evening and decided to join a local coalition to fight a proposed project that would divert water from the Green River Basin to Colorado's thirsty Front Range.

The council -- on a 5-4 vote -- decided it was better to "get in the war" early rather than wait for a federal environmental study to be released that might quash the controversial pipeline proposal by Colorado entrepreneur Aaron Million.

The council was deadlocked on the resolution after a tie vote during an early July meeting. The council decided to take another look at the issue during a special meeting Tuesday.

The resolution calls for Rock Springs to join the Communities Protecting the Green River coalition, which includes neighboring Green River and Sweetwater County. It also set aside \$150,000 from the city's budget for the effort.

Council members who favored the cooperative agreement said it was important the city take a leadership role in the fight against the project.

They also said the city needs to mount opposition to the project early in the permitting process, rather than after the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers completes an environmental study in three or four years.

"If we don't get in on the front end of this ... I think we're missing the boat," said councilman Carl Demshar, who cast the key vote Tuesday after missing the first council vote in July.

"I think the real issue is ... where do you think we ought to jump into this game?" Demshar said. "The bottom line is that I believe if we wait for this (study) to come out, we may be behind the eight-ball."

Councilwoman Joyce Corcoran agreed. "We have to fight (the project) from the very beginning," she said.

But some council members opposed to the move worried the resolution was premature. They said the city should wait for the study to be released before embracing a strategy to fight a project that might not happen.

"The EIS will tell us where the real battle lies," councilman Kent Porenta said.

Councilman Neil Kourbelas expects the agency to deny the permit application because Million's project won't meet the "basic needs" required by law.

"The purpose and need has not been satisfied on this ... because the downstream users have indicated they will not take water from a private entity," Kourbelas said. "Some experts think this project is pretty much dead in the water right now, no pun intended."

Kourbelas also noted that many multinational industrial interests in southwest Wyoming, including oil and gas development, have been "stopped in their tracks due to the breeding habits" of sage grouse in recent years.

Kourbelas said the impacts on sage grouse -- which are currently being considered by federal officials for special protections under the Endangered Species Act -- from the removal of large amounts of water from southwest Wyoming's "fragile environment" could have "devastating effects" on Million's proposal.

"You don't think the EIS will address this?" Kourbelas asked.

Unused portion

Million is seeking a Corps permit to construct a private, 560-mile-long pipeline that would divert water from the Flaming Gorge Reservoir in southwest Wyoming and move it to the Front Range and then down to Colorado Springs.

The pipeline would deliver about 250,000 acre feet of water each year, according to plans for the estimated \$3 billion project.

In April, the Corps oversaw a contentious public hearing in Green River before hundreds of area residents to unveil the proposal. It was mostly met by outrage from locals.

Residents contended Million's Regional Watershed Supply Project would have no real benefits for southwest Wyoming, could hurt local industry, could curtail future growth in Green River and Rock Springs, and could threaten a world-class fishery.

Million said at the meeting that drawing water from the Flaming Gorge -- which can hold up to 3.8 million acre feet of water -- and the Green River could be done while protecting recreation, endangered fish and downstream users.

He said the water would be obtained from the Green River Basin as part of the unused portion allocated to the states of Wyoming and Colorado under the Colorado and Upper Colorado River Basin compacts.

The project would move Colorado's allocated water to the Front Range and Wyoming's allocated water to eastern Wyoming, according to plans.

In May, municipal and county officials informally agreed it was time to organize and bring in some heavy hitters to help fight the proposal.

Officials from the three governmental entities agreed to form a coalition -- and perhaps hire a public relations firm at a later date -- to contest the project and possibly litigate the proposal if necessary. Each entity was asked to contribute \$150,000 to the effort.

Shortly after, Green River's council voted to enter into a cooperative agreement to form the Communities Protecting the Green River coalition.

Sweetwater County commissioners followed suit in a July meeting, but the Rock Springs council's tie vote left the fate of the coalition up in the air.

Under the resolution, the cities and counties will establish a five-member steering committee that will spearhead their opposition to the proposal. The committee will be comprised of one representative each from Rock Springs, Green River and the county, and two at-large members.

The committee is charged with conducting the investigations and studies necessary to develop an overall strategy for opposing the project.

State's battle

During Tuesday's meeting, some council members wondered why the three local entities should have to shoulder the burden of fighting the project.

They voiced concerns that the state was not taking enough action against the proposal.

"Why is it up to Green River and Rock Springs to fight this battle?" Porenta said. "Why are we fighting the state's

battle ... especially when the cities are strapped for cash?"

Councilman Kourbelas called the new coalition a "very weak partnership." He said the entities should "regroup and bring in some new partners" to fight the proposal.

"We need a much more powerful partnership than this resolution suggests," he said.

But councilman Rob Zotti disagreed. "How do we get anybody else to buy into this ... if we can't form a partnership ourselves?" he said.

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