

Elected Officials in Rural Nebraska Pass Anti-Keystone Pipeline Resolution

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LINCOLN — Opponents of the proposed Keystone XL pipeline claimed a victory Tuesday when elected officials in northern Nebraska said the project is not welcome in their county.

Bill Tielke, chairman of the Holt County Board, called the 7-0 vote in opposition to the controversial project a symbolic act. He said he and the other board members wanted to convey their concern that the pipeline represents a threat to the county's underground water supplies.

The resolution is a statement of opposition to all crude oil and tar sands pipelines across Holt County, a rural county of 10,400 people where farming and ranching dominates the economy. Pipeline opponents called it the first resolution against the pipeline passed by an elected body in Nebraska.

At least one county board in Nebraska has voted to support the pipeline in the past, but there may be several more.

The vote comes as controversy heats up over the proposed pipeline. Nebraska law enforcement officials met last week with the company that wants to build the pipeline.

Several sheriffs said the meeting was set up by the Nebraska State Patrol as a way to plan for what could turn into heated confrontations between construction crews and opponents.

The project is strongly supported by labor groups and the petroleum industry for the jobs it would create and the new oil supplies it would tap. Environmental groups oppose the project over the potential for groundwater pollution and fears of increase in greenhouse gas emissions from further development of Canada's vast tar sands region.

The U.S. State Department is currently completing an environmental impact statement before it determines if the project is in the national interest.

More than two dozens opponents of the pipeline attended Tuesday's meeting at the Holt County courthouse in O'Neill, based upon a reporter's estimate.

“We're happy they're finally standing with us and understanding this is not good for Holt County or anybody in Nebraska who drinks water from the Ogallala Aquifer,” said Laura Meusch, a landowner near the Niobrara River who attended the meeting.

Three representatives of Trans-Canada Corp., the company seeking to build the pipeline, made their case against the resolution. A company spokesman who was not with the contingent later declined comment, saying he had not seen the resolution.

Jane Kleebe, the leader of the environmental advocacy group Bold Nebraska, said the next step for opponents will be to encourage other counties along the pipeline route to pass similar resolutions or even zoning changes.

She also criticized the meeting held last week between multiple law enforcement agencies and TransCanada. Kleebe said she understood that the company is seeking to hire off-duty officers to work as security guards.

“That’s a conflict of interest,” she said. “Are they working for our citizens or are they working for TransCanada?”

The meeting was set up by the patrol and was open to police and sheriff’s agencies along the pipeline route. The Nebraska Attorney General’s Office sent a representative, as did some county prosecutors.

Sheriffs of three counties along the route confirmed when contacted Tuesday that they attended the meeting.

The company was invited to offer examples of the kinds of protests and demonstrations they’ve encountered in Texas, where the southern leg of the project is under construction.

The information was welcome for counties that don’t often see demonstrations, said Antelope County Sheriff Robert Moore.

“We talked about the fine line between peaceful and what crosses the line and makes it a criminal,” he said.

Sheriff Cory Beverly of Boyd County, who also attended the meeting, said its purpose was to share information to help departments better protect public safety.

Shawn Howard, a TransCanada spokesman, declined to say what the company plans to do specifically to protect construction crews. But he did not rule out the possibility that the company may try to hire off-duty police in Nebraska.

“It would be great if we didn’t have to,” he said.

The Norfolk Daily News contributed to this report.

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