

McKinley County guts uranium ordinance

Written by By Bernie Dotson Sun Correspondent
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Tilden: 'This is not a dead issue'

After the fourth reading of an ordinance to study the impact of uranium mining, processing and exploration during a three-year moratorium, the McKinley County Board of Commissioners voted 2-1 on a somewhat weakened resolution, a community member attending the meeting suggested afterward.

Commissioners Carol Bowman-Muskett and Genevieve Jackson voted in favor of the measure. Bill Lee, attending his first meeting since being elected last year, dissented. The changed language of the resolution does not address community concerns and, in a literal sense, passes the buck back to state and federal decision-makers, the community member said.

"Uranium mining is hurting our people," Mervyn Tilden, a Church Rich human rights activist, said. "There is nothing positive in this when it comes to Navajos. There is the issue of bad health and there are no good jobs associated with this."

The resolution that was passed suggests communities seek state and federal help to address matters in the original ordinance. The resolution is non-binding and does not include any specific timelines or requirements that the Board of Commissioners take future steps to address community concerns. The resolution was one of four options that commissioners considered in place of the original ordinance.

"I don't want to close this," Commissioner Genevieve Jackson said. "This is about health and environmental issues." Jackson asked that the issue be tabled so that more input could be

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gathered from community members.

The original ordinance was the result of community discussions seeking a local solution to the matter. The original ordinance would have permitted the McKinley County Board of Commissioners to pause with respect to new development.

Lee asked McKinley County Attorney Doug Decker about the cost of litigation should the moratorium be approved. Decker replied that legal costs could run as high as \$50,000. Despite the outcome, some who spoke before commissioners vowed to return to later meetings when the uranium matter comes up again.

During the previous four commission meetings in which the original ordinance was heard, dozens of community meetings filled the commission chambers in support of the ordinance and to provide public comment, urging the commission to enact the moratorium.

Janene Yazzie of Lupton, Ariz., asked the Board of Commissioners to approve a moratorium so that more research could be done by county officials with respect to health. Yazzie, like Tilden, has attended several county meetings in 2016 when the uranium issue was on the agenda.

“There’s never been any serious analysis of the costs incurred by our community from the uranium extraction industry,” Janene Yazzie of Lupton, Ariz., said. “A moratorium would have been a positive first step in considering those costs. Our community brought this to the commission. This is an important for our community as we can see by the organized and involved citizens who have pushed this from the beginning,” Yazzie said.

Tilden added, “Even if the McKinley County Commission moratorium is not permanent, it would have been a step in the right direction for the safety and well-being of McKinley County and Navajo Nation residents. This can be a good faith effort and an establishment of a good-neighbor policy. This is not a dead issue.”

The Navajo nation has had a ban on uranium mining in place for more than a decade. Tommy Haws, president of the Greater Gallup Economic Development Corporation, sent a letter to the

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County Commission opposing the moratorium, calling the proposed ordinance “potentially redundant.”

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