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PUD scrubs White River hydro

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Cost and time work against plan

By Kathy Ursprung
The Dalles Chronicle

Northern Wasco County PUD directors voted unanimously to scrub plans to build a small hydropower plant at White River Falls.

The outcome of two meetings earlier this month convinced the board of directors and their consultants that the project could not move forward quickly enough to meet the timeline connected with a Federal Energy Regulatory Commission preliminary permit or pass the cost-benefit analysis based on current projections of energy prices over the next 20 years.



A SMALL HYDROPOWER plant on the same footprint as the early 20th century plant, shown at White River Falls, was scrubbed March 22 by the Northern Wasco County PUD. PUD photo

“This project, at this point, is not economical and I could not recommend this project go forward at this time,” said Mike Maloney of SOAR Technologies, Inc., one of several consultants on the project.

Maloney briefed the PUD commission March 22 at its monthly meeting. “There are better places to spend your time and resources.”

The PUD’s longtime legal counsel, attorney Jim Foster, concurred with Maloney.

“I, in no good conscience, could suggest that you continue at this point,” Foster said.

Foster and Maloney were among several PUD representatives who met with stakeholders March 10 in Portland to discuss prospective obstacles to obtaining a water right on the White River.

Oregon Parks and Recreation Department owns a scenic water right at White River Falls that encompasses most of the river’s flow, but state law says power generation water rights may supersede scenic rights, consultants reported at a previous meeting. However, the statute is poorly written and does not include a challenge process, which means Oregon Water Resources Department, which oversees the water rights, will probably take a conservative approach, Foster said. That means hearings, public testimony, time and money.

Stakeholders at the informal meeting included American Rivers, Oregon Parks, Oregon Fish and Wildlife and others.

“If the only issue we had was the water right, I would be fairly optimistic,” Foster said.

An official presentation March 16 before the Oregon Parks Commission proved the project’s death knell. PUD representatives briefed the commission on their desire to obtain a lease for the hydro plant at White River Falls State Park.

“In summary, the parks commission heard our case, but they are not willing to work on a lease until the parks commission knows their people are behind them — their constituents,” Maloney said. “We need to provide the commission with the information they need to gain acceptance for the project. They want to see the visual impact and the park visitation and usage.”

“We were not able to come up with any affirmative action with the parks,” Foster said.

Oregon Parks didn’t close down discussion of the project, Maloney noted.

“We have something for them to gain in that park,” Maloney said.

The preliminary proposal includes plans to enhance the park with new trails, an irrigation system and interpretive material on the historic power plant, which was established in 1905.

“We can improve their park, but at this point I can’t tell you we are going to meet our constraints,” Maloney said.

“With the water issue we have a path,” Foster added, “but with the parks we have a process that, until the lease is signed, we have no idea whether we’re going to have a project or not.”

The PUD invested \$118,000 to-date into exploring the prospect of a small hydropower plant at White River Falls. Some other bills remain outstanding, said Bob Guidinger, who oversees the PUD’s hydropower generation.

Directors praised the consultants’ efforts on their behalf, but expressed some frustration about the barriers that emerged surrounding the project, particularly since Congress is working on legislation to expand the nation’s hydropower generation.

“Congress is now making a push to do just what we’re trying to do,” said Director Howard Gonsler. “I don’t think the state of Oregon is helping us do that.”

“I truly believed when I brought the project in that it had a fair chance,” Maloney said. “I thought it had enough wins in the project to make it through. I hope what we learned can be used for other projects.”