

SDS backup plan via Fremont gains support

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CAÑON CITY • The backup plan for the Southern Delivery System is on the path to approval after Fremont County commissioners on Tuesday supported a water pipeline from the Arkansas River.

"After a year of briefings, volumes of information from the applicants, public comments for and against it, information from this public meeting and knowing the size of the project has adverse issues and everything that has been submitted, I am in support of the application," said Commissioner Larry Lasha after a four-hour hearing before an audience of at least 125 that packed the commissioners' meeting room.

The board, however, did not vote on Colorado Springs Utilities' permit application.

Commissioners decided to wait two weeks to hammer out conditions under which they could approve the plan.

Their concerns include lessening construction impacts, giving Utilities time to reach water-sharing deals with Beaver Park and Penrose water districts and to agree to participate in flood-control work near Penrose, and ensuring Utilities uses eminent domain with private property owners only as a last resort.

"We've got some details we've got to work out, and we're going to work on it," said Utilities project manager John Fredell after the hearing. "I think this is a great outcome."

Utilities' preferred route for the \$1.1 billion pipeline is from Pueblo Reservoir. But because of opposition and the fact Pueblo County could deny a permit, Utilities is seeking approval for its backup plan at the same time. Utilities officials hope to begin work on the pipeline this fall and complete it by 2014. Utilities officials will meet with Pueblo County officials Feb. 25 for the fifth part of a hearing on its land-use application.

The Fremont County plan would cost about \$150 million more than the Pueblo Reservoir route. The river intake would be east of Florence, and the pipeline would follow Colorado Highway 115 north, then cross Fort Carson and run north to a new reservoir at Jimmy Camp Creek. Colorado Springs owns water rights to the Arkansas.

Utilities has invested about \$4 million in planning and engineering for that plan.

Colorado Springs officials tried to assure Fremont County commissioners that the impacts of construction would be mitigated and that property owners in the path of the pipeline would be treated fairly. It would cross 50 private properties in the county, and Utilities would negotiate with the owners to buy easements.

They stressed the benefits to Fremont County, including \$185 million in construction work in the county, possibly piping water to the two small water districts and development of a riverside park in Florence, near where the pipe intake would be.

"We're here to do whatever it takes to make sure that we address the impacts of this project," Fredell said. "The project is going to bring economic stimulus at just the right time, it seems, in our economy, in terms of a large construction project."

The plan got a mixed reception from the 18 or so who spoke at the hearing. Some wondered if Utilities is seeking a permit from Fremont County only for leverage in its negotiations with Pueblo.

"They leave us with the impression they are using Fremont County as a sacrificial pawn in their chess game with Pueblo County," said Dennis Jones. "I say their gamble shouldn't pay off here."

Resident Steve Cool said commissioners shouldn't overlook the economic impact, and noted that if Utilities looks up-river for water, it could harm local rafting companies that run recreational tours on the river. "If we balk at that right here, below our take-out points, what effect or control are we going to have on what happens up the river?" Cool said.