

No wrestling at SDS hearing, lots of faith Most support Pueblo County conditions for pipeline at Springs hearing. April 10, 2009



CHIEFTAIN PHOTO/CHRIS McLEAN -- Stan Hren, chairman of the Pueblo West metro district, encourages members of the Colorado Springs City Council to approve Pueblo County's conditions for the Southern Delivery System.

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THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN**

COLORADO SPRINGS - Across the street from Colorado Springs City Hall Thursday people lined up for a cage fight. Next door, a church was having a Maundy Thursday service.

It was tough to find a parking space.

Inside City Hall, nothing so violent or holy was happening, as Colorado Springs City Council reviewed Pueblo County's conditions for a Southern Delivery System at a public hearing.

The permit would be a "green light" to build a pipeline from Pueblo Dam to meet needs up north, Colorado Springs Utilities Chief Executive Officer Jerry Forte told Council.

"Your approval would be a green light to come from Pueblo Dam. . . . Coming from the reservoir is like having a giant bucket of water," Forte said. "It's the least expensive place for us to build, operate and maintain the pipeline." Forte asked council to approve the conditions, which he said are acceptable to Utilities.

Council will vote on the conditions at its regular meeting Tuesday.

Pueblo County's conditions include \$75 million for ongoing sewage system upgrades and \$50 million for Fountain Creek improvements. They also include agreements that protect flows in the Arkansas River below Pueblo, an agreement with the Pueblo Board of Water Works on a new North Outlet Works at Pueblo Dam and a program to maintain levels at Lake Pueblo. Colorado Springs also has committed to creating new wetlands and erosion control at Clear Springs Ranch, property it owns south of Fountain.

The conditions allow future partners to be added to SDS, as long as water is not taken out of the Arkansas River basin.

There are also conditions that regulate construction activities, provide for repair of roads damaged during construction and for revegetation of land. Colorado Springs has also committed to using eminent domain only as a last resort to acquire property and easements for the project.

Fountain, Security and Pueblo West would be partners in SDS, if it comes from Pueblo Dam. Representatives from all three partners voiced strong support for the \$1.1 billion pipeline project.

Stan Hren, chairman of the Pueblo West Metro District, told Council the district is in full support of the conditions, even though it has raised concerns about the requirement that it must participate in the Pueblo Arkansas River flow program.

Only one Colorado Springs resident, Walter Lawson, criticized the conditions as “heavy-handed” and asked for full disclosure of the costs to local ratepayers.

“What are the hidden costs of implementation?” Lawson said. “Colorado Springs residents are owed an explanation.”

Most who spoke praised the virtues of the conditions.

All three Pueblo County Commissioners, Jeff Chostner, John Cordova and Anthony Nunez, attended the meeting. Their counterpart, El Paso County Commissioners Sallie Clark, said conditions were thoughtful and advanced efforts to improve Fountain Creek.

Alan Hamel, executive director of the Pueblo Board of Water Works, asked Council to approve Pueblo County conditions and build the pipeline through Pueblo, rather than Fremont County, because of the superiority of a connection to the dam. Hamel also spoke in favor of the river flow and outlet agreements.

Barbara Vidmar, a Pueblo City Council member, asked Colorado Springs to approve Pueblo County conditions, saying they further developed the intergovernmental agreements reached with Pueblo in 2004.

A parade of members of the Colorado Springs business community - chamber of commerce, economic development, home builders and city improvement groups - spoke in strong support of the Pueblo County route and conditions, saying they would be best for the city.

Some spoke against SDS, but without directly addressing Pueblo County’s conditions.

Don Schley, a Colorado Springs development consultant, said the cost of SDS has not been fully revealed. He said the city has spent money on parts of the project that were later changed and criticized how the city has handle its water rights portfolio.

“The need alone to pump water uphill 1,700 feet is an unbearable cost for ratepayers,” Schley said. “The community cannot bear this cost when there are other alternatives that are more feasible.”

Dave Miller, of Palmer Lake, told council it should consider his Central Colorado Project, a plan to build a reservoir at Union Park in Gunnison County, and called SDS an “interim project” until his project could be built. Miller has promoted other versions of the project without success for more than 20 years.