

Northern Colorado BUSINESS REPORT

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Fort Collins backs off NISP goal

By Steve Porter

FORT COLLINS - A letter from the city council to Gov. John Hickenlooper makes it clear that Fort Collins does not endorse an economic development goal recently set by Weld and Larimer county officials to support the Northern Integrated Supply Project.

Officials from both counties put their stamp of approval on a goal to "develop, preserve and enhance water storage and delivery options in the region," which included NISP, the expansion of Halligan and Seaman reservoirs in Poudre Canyon and the conversion of abandoned gravel pits to water storage.

The goal was one of six sent by the counties to the state Office of Economic Development as part of the governor's statewide Bottom Up County Economic Development Initiative.

But the Fort Collins city council, after being informed of the goal by Gary Wockner, director of the Save the Poudre group opposed to NISP, sent a letter to Gov. Hickenlooper on May 27 reminding him that the city is on record opposing the NISP project.

The letter, signed by Mayor Karen Weitkunat, said the city has "deep concern" with the goal that included support of NISP in its action plan.

The letter said city staff was "not provided an opportunity to review the final draft" of the goals statement and that it was "a surprise" to the city that the NISP-supporting goal was included.

Strong reservations

"Furthermore, the city has very strong reservations about (NISP)," the letter continues. "As you may know, Fort Collins' City Council voted unanimously to oppose the project as it was described in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement published in 2009."

The letter attaches a nine-page executive summary of concerns drafted when the council unanimously voted to oppose NISP on Sept. 2, 2008. At the time of the vote, the council was reacting to the draft E15 that was still under public review.

Those concerns included worries that the proposed 170,000-acre-foot Glade Reservoir just north of Ted's Place near the mouth of Poudre Canyon would divert up to 71 percent of Cache la Poudre River water upstream from the city of Fort Collins, and could result in the need to fund tens of millions of dollars in water and wastewater improvements.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is currently reviewing those concerns and others as it prepares a Supplemental EIS for the project, which is expected to be released sometime next year.

Mayor Weitkunat, elected in April, said the letter aimed to set the record straight on where Fort Collins stands with the NISP proposal as currently designed.

"The intent was to state Fort Collins' position, and secondly we were never involved or contacted with what went on," she said of the goal-setting process, which had been touted as a good example of regional cooperation.

"It came as a surprise, especially the statement on NISP," she said. "It was a positioning that

really didn't have Fort Collins' input."

Weitkunat, who personally supports NISP, said the city may be partly responsible for letting the goal slip into the final goal statement for the region.

"You have to say maybe the city wasn't real vigilant," she said.

Weld County idea

Frank Lancaster, Larimer County manager, said Larimer officials basically went along with Weld County's desire to include the goal in the final document.

"The endorsement of NISP came only from the Weld County side," he said. "It wasn't even mentioned on our side. It didn't come up at all."

Tom Donnelly, Larimer County commissioners' chair, confirmed inserting the goal was a Weld County idea.

"Weld did insert that specific goal," he said. "It's not our goal. But Larimer County does strongly support the NISP project. Water and jobs are strongly tied together and economic development is definitely a top priority for Larimer County.

"We're in the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression," Donnelly added. "This (NISP) project is part of the solution to maintain agriculture and for economic development for the future."

NISP is being promoted by Berthoud-based Northern Water, which has signed 11 towns and cities and four water districts to pay for the estimated \$490 million storage project. Neither Greeley nor Fort Collins, which have their own municipal water supplies, are participants in NISP.

Barbara Kirkmeyer, chair of the Weld County board of commissioners, said Weld County heard loudly from its constituents that support of NISP and water storage in general was a high priority.

"The goal is actually about supporting water storage projects," she said. "That came from our seven regional meetings we had, so we had that in our Weld County plan."

The two counties came together - as requested by the governor's office - to develop a combined regional economic plan. That's when the NISP-related goal was included and sent on to the state, Kirkmeyer said.

"There was a very fast timeframe at that point to get our goals together," she said.

Not behind closed doors

But Kirkmeyer said Weld County stands behind the NISP-related goal and denies it was inserted without an opportunity for public comment.

"Everyone had the opportunity to comment," she said. "Gary (Wockner) makes it sound as if it was done behind closed doors, and that wasn't the case."

Wockner insists the "public process was subverted" and that's why he contacted the Fort Collins city council through emails when he learned about the NISP-related goal being sent to the state.

Wockner said he also sent a letter to the state on behalf of Save the Poudre.

"We are requesting that supporting NISP be removed from the economic development plan for Northern Colorado," he said. "We think NISP would drain and destroy the Poudre River and harm the Northern Colorado economy."

But getting the NISP-related goal removed from the region's plan will likely be a difficult challenge for Save the Poudre, which claims it gathered more than 4,000 emails of support.

"Water storage has always been a goal for this area," Kirkmeyer said. "It's not coming out of the plan. It's the economic plan for the region and we still want that in there."

