A trainload of trouble rolls toward Oakland

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The plan to ship 9 million tons of coal annually through West Oakland must be stopped. It’s bad enough that it’s environmentally threatening, fiscally dubious, and the product of duplicity and political chicanery.

Even worse is the fact that a significant amount of public money is being invested in this ill-advised scheme.

“This is a very bad idea on many, many levels,” said state Sen. Loni Hancock, D-Berkeley, author of legislation attempting to stop the coal-export facility at the former Oakland Army Base.

“It undermines everything we’ve been doing for the past decade now to try to contain climate change,” Hancock added. “No. 1, it makes us look hypocritical.”

And more than a little foolish — if not craven.

Remember, Gov. Jerry Brown was at the international climate talks in Paris last December to extol the state’s innovation in reducing carbon emissions — and to implore the rest of the world to follow suit.

A coal plant in China — where much of the coal going through the new Oakland depot would presumably be headed — would have the same impact on global warming as one in the Golden State.

We invoke the governor’s own words of wisdom from last year:

“It doesn’t make sense to be shutting down coal plants and then export it for somebody else to burn in a more dirty way,” he said. “But what we need is a national plan to reduce all fossil fuels. Certainly, coal would be at the top.”

The climate impact alone should be enough to give anyone pause about a plan to ship coal on railroad lines from Utah to be loaded at the new Oakland shipping facility. But then there is the concern about local pollution, which is one of the reasons Mayor Libby Schaaf, Oakland City Council members and the Port of Oakland oppose the project.

“Stop it immediately,” Schaaf wrote in a May 2015 email to the project’s well-connected developer, Phil Tagami, adding, “If you don’t do that soon we will all have to spend time and energy in a public battle that no one needs and will distract us from the important work at hand.”

The battle has only escalated since then.

It’s important to note that Tagami for years had vigorously denied rumors that coal shipments would be part of this $800 million cargo facility. In a December 2013 newsletter, he accused critics of spreading misinformation because his real estate firm had “no interest or involvement in the pursuit of coal-related operations at the former Oakland Army Base.”
It’s now abundantly clear that coal is a key element of at least the near-term plans for the rail-to-ship transfer facility. In a March 14 Open Forum piece, a partner in Tagami’s company suggested that the “political threats to block coal” amount to “a taking of vested rights.”

“Today it’s coal; tomorrow it’ll be wood pellets; and next week it will be genetically modified grain,” wrote Mark McClure of California Capital and Investment Group.

Yes, today it is coal — one commodity the developer had specifically promised to exclude, in response to concerns about of its local and global environmental impacts.

The questionable policies go well beyond Oakland. The Utah Legislature, looking to help get its state’s coal to foreign markets, just voted to commit $53 million in state money to help build that deep-water port in Oakland.

Here’s where that deal really smells:

The money is coming out of a fund from federal mining royalties that is supposed to be go to local projects in rural communities for roads, parks, public buildings, water and sewer systems. To get around that legal requirement, Utah legislators approved a scheme to dip into sales-tax revenue earmarked for transportation for the $53 million, put it in a newly created account — and then immediately reimburse it from the royalty fund.

Utah’s Senate Democratic leader, Gene Davis, was quoted in the Salt Lake City Tribune as calling it “a shell game.”

From a fiscal standpoint, considering the world’s shift away from coal — even in China — perhaps the best question of all was posed by Rep. Joel Briscoe, a Salt Lake City Democrat: “If this is such a great financial investment ... where are the banks stepping up to fund this program?”

California’s leaders need to intensify the pressure to keep coal shipments out of Oakland, whether it takes legislation, lawsuits or the project overseers simply recognizing the need to keep a promise.