A big victory for both Niles and the Planet ...

Rough-and-Tumble Democracy in Oakland Delivers Ban on Coal Exports

Last night’s (June 27, 2016) special meeting was both historic and heartening. The Oakland City Council unanimously banned the export of coal from Oakland, which joined Portland and Los Angeles in stopping the export of coal. Now these and other port cities must do the same for oil.

After a rally outside, the Council Chambers filled up quickly. An additional four rooms were needed to accommodate hundreds of concerned citizens.

Assistant City Administrator Claudia Cappio kicked off the contentious debate with staff report’s recommendations for the coal ban. She cited a study by an environmental consultant which concluded that coal dust can damage vital organs, and cause cancers and lung ailments, and stunt children’s growth. No surprises here.

Linking Concerns about Public Health with Those About the Environment

Several MDs and RNs spoke passionately in support of concerns about adding coal dust to West Oakland’s already degraded, unhealthy air. One talked about the forced deliveries she had to perform because the mothers, many of them from West Oakland, suffered from severe asthma.

Several medical professionals also cited concerns about aggravating climate chaos, were all that coal ever to be mined, transported, exported and burned.
The amount of greenhouse gasses that would be released was astounding: one doctor calculated that if the coal were burned, the atmospheric pollution would exceed the pollution put out by all five Bay Area refineries—and become the equivalent of half of all California’s emissions. Another doctor pointed out that coal trains produce twice as much particulate pollution—about 100 tons of coal dust per year, beyond their diesel pollution.

Several politicians spoke at the hearing, among them most of the Council members, Berkeley Mayor Tom Bates, and state Senate candidate Nancy Skinner, both of whom also supported the ban. Bates presented a big-picture view, speaking about the public health consequences up and down the rail line.

Council member Rebecca Kaplan pointed out that the same number of jobs—and probably more—would be created if the terminal handled exports other than coal. She also pointed out that a mailer had depicted the white faces on the Sierra Club’s national board but omitted those of several board members of color. As they began to lose argument, proponents were not above playing the race card.

**Issues of Jobs for People Needing Them Badly**

However, questions of environmental and economic justice were passionately expressed. “If a person doesn’t have a job, it’s going to affect their health — they can’t get the right kind of medical (care) they need,” argued Rev. Kevin Barnes of Abyssinian Missionary Baptist Church.

Josie Camacho, head of the Alameda County Labor Council, critiqued recent mailers sent by a shadowy pro-coal front group, Jobs 4 Oakland. The mailers played on West Oakland residents' economic desperation, she pointed out, by claiming a ban would eliminate 6,500 union jobs. “We will not be threatened by bogus
jobs claims.”

Even more persuasive was Elaine Brown, a former Black Panther who now runs a farm that employs—at almost $20/hr.—former prisoners needing work. “We need black jobs all right, but not ones that give you black lung.”

While some black clergy supported the coal proposition, several did not. Baptist minister Rev. Kenneth Chambers expressed concern about the controversy’s injuries to the body politic, calling for efforts to heal the black community.

But if the campaign opened wounds, it also brought different groups together, often for the first time. Made possible by the dedication of a rainbow coalition of environmental and labor groups—ranging from the Sierra Club to No Coal in Oakland to the California Nurses Association—the victory was well earned.

See the SF Chronicle’s coverage

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