

WPPSS fiasco

Bills burn in night

Should Springfield Utility Board ratepayers pay nearly \$124 million for electricity that will never be available for their use? Four hundred Springfield residents marched — bearing candles against the dark and chanting in the cold Wednesday — to answer that question with an emphatic refusal.

Springfield utility users are suffering under the debt incurred by SUB in its disastrous participation in the Washington Public Power Supply System. Five years ago SUB signed a contract with WPPSS that bound the utility to a 1.47 percent share of the construction of two nuclear power plants. The contract was legally binding — the \$124 million is due regardless of whether the plants were ever completed. Construction on power plants Nos. 4 and 5, the principle sources of Springfield's WPPSS power allotment, was halted last summer when financing failed. The decision to terminate the plants has also incurred costs over and above SUB's initial estimate.

SUB's association with WPPSS has been a major money fiasco. The SUB contract with WPPSS has been so much bad paper for Springfield utility users. The 400 ratepayers marching Wednesday represented a grassroots revolt against SUB and its treatment of customers as so many serfs in their feudal scheme.

"SUB signed away Springfield ratepayers money," without their consent, Leslie Ratley said. Ratley, a University journalism and political science student, is one of the original three plaintiffs in a lawsuit filed in December challenging the utility's involvement in the WPPSS project. So far at least 26 people have joined in the lawsuit since the filing. The challenge has changed with the termination of WPPSS plants No. 4 and 5. The lawsuit now claims SUB's agreement to pay for nonexistent electricity from the now-defunct power plants is illegal.

The lawsuit's challenge to SUB's WPPSS involvement is essentially valid as it points out the amount of debt incurred well exceeds the debt limit set by Springfield's city charter.

At Wednesday's city council meeting five of six council members and the mayor of Springfield went on record supporting an SUB decision to oppose the ratepayers lawsuit seeking to nullify the utility's involvement in WPPSS.

When SUB was considering involvement with WPPSS, Congressman Jim Weaver asked the utility board to let its ratepayers vote on whether to enter a contract agreement. But Weaver says "they (SUB) were contemptuous and arrogant. They said no."

The plaintiffs in the lawsuit echo Weaver's statement charging the board with overstepping its authority when it signed the original WPPSS contract without voter approval. The plaintiffs contend that this is another reason to declare the contract void.

SUB's share of some \$2.5 billion in bonds already sold for WPPSS projects is estimated at \$40 million — with interest and principal payments over the 35-year term of the bonds that comes to nearly \$124 million. This debt is only the beginning as SUB is in the process of determining whether to advance a loan to WPPSS to help cover the termination costs of plants Nos. 4 and 5. SUB, on recommendation of Howard Rankin, special legal counsel, decided to "defer entering into this termination agreement." To defer is not to cancel altogether.

Who pays? The Springfield utility users pay and pay and pay — for the next 35 years if the legal challenge to SUB's involvement in WPPSS fails. The challenge shouldn't fail as it resides on the firm arguments of ratepayer approval and violation of the Springfield city charter. Beyond these points, most courts with a basis in the common law would not hold the Springfield ratepayers liable for payment for nonexistent WPPSS electricity.

The 400 marchers in Springfield were a cross-section of the people of Springfield, not only those who consistently protest nuclear power. They marched as the harassed ratepayers whose utility bills escalated two-fold over last year. And in their justifiable ire some used the candles they bore against the darkness to ignite their utility bills.



NURSE, IT LOOKS LIKE THIS OPERATION CALLS FOR MY FAMOUS PERSUASIVE BEDSIDE MANNER

harry esteve editor's note

Since the beginning of the anti-nuclear movement, environmentalists have argued economics — as well as health risks — in efforts to prevent nuclear power construction.

In the past few weeks, the environmentalists have been proven right. And they're saying "I told you so."

The I-told-you-so's began at Three Mile Island. Anti-nuclear activists had warned against the dangers of leaking plutonium, while nuclear engineers scoffed. But plutonium leaked during the Three Mile Island disaster.

There were allegations that the public would be expected to pay for mishaps like Three Mile Island's — allegations Pennsylvania officials denied. A year later, Pennsylvania ratepayers and citizens around Three Mile Island were paying increased rates and taxes to cover the clean-up costs.

Last week, environmentalists had yet another chance to gloat about predictions coming true when it was reported that one-third of all the nuclear plants in the United States were shut down — victims of leaks, equipment failures and other problems anti-nuclears had warned about.

Of the 72 operating plants in the country, 25 were idle. Radiation leaked out of nearly every one. And money continues to be flushed away every day they remain closed. A simple "I told you so" is little solace.

Now the Washington Public Power Supply System is offering up the most poignant example of nuclear economic waste yet. Naturally, the I-told-you-so's are flowing, and Oregon's energetic, democratic congressman, Jim Weaver is effusing some of the loudest.

"My warnings that construction of these colossal white elephants would drive our energy costs sky-high, bankrupt our region's smaller utilities, and eventually collapse of their own financial weight, were scoffed at

and ridiculed by utility executives," Weaver said in a January energy and environment report.

His statements elicit cheers from ratepayers who are paying for the WPPSS fiasco, but do little to lower their electric bills.

Perhaps there is little that can be done. The money already has been wasted, the environment already has suffered radiation sickness. Saying "I told you so" doesn't help any, unless energy executives and Washington D.C. officials get sick of hearing it. But they don't, obviously.

So here are a few *we-are-telling - you so's*.

The Reagan administration's desire to debilitate the Environment Protection Agency, to dismantle the Clean Air Act, to close the Office of Surface Mining and to gut the federal solar energy research budget in favor of nuclear promotion, could mean the largest environmental step backward — ever.

Under Ann Gorsuch — an ex-Colorado state senator who constantly fought against environmental legislation in that state — the EPA plans to eliminate two-thirds of its pollution prevention programs. It also plans to rollback emission standards for new automobiles and to lift some deadlines for achieving clean air in some parts of the country.

The nationwide movement toward cleaner air will continue, Gorsuch insists, but "at a more reasoned pace."

Anti-environment action such as this will mean an increase in acid rain, continued strip mining in some of the nation's most beautiful parks, and constant air pollution levels that rival those during heavy field-burning days in the Willamette Valley.

It also will allow environmentalists to choke out a few more I-told-you-so's — some of the most empty sounding words ever spoken.

staff

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