



PHOTO BY STEPHEN QUIRKE

Commissioners for the Port of St. Helens (left to right) Patrick Trapp, Mike Avent, Chris Iverson, Larry Erickson and Robert Keyser discuss the Global Partners contract, Dec. 12.

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the plan. During that two week delay, port commissioners said they received about 500 emails, most of them against loosening API gravity restrictions.

Many uncertainties resulting from such a short public process were on full display at the Dec. 12 hearing.

Paul Peterson, Superintendent of the Scappoose School District, asked commissioners if proposed API changes would make students along the railroad either more or less safe. Peterson repeated the question four times before commissioner Patrick Trapp replied that the number of variables involved made it “unfair to give you an answer one way or another.”

“Those of you wondering whether this will be safer for the school, the answer is no. It will not be safer for the school if you move oil for Global Partners,” countered Dan Serres of Columbia Riverkeeper. “We urge you to retain the current limitations on the API standard. Both because of the drinking water issues ... but also as a basic safety issue. People in the Northwest are at risk with every one of these trains that passes through our region. We’re playing Russian roulette with oil trains, and we’re asking you not to put more bullets in that gun.”

Among those urging the Port to postpone their vote was Vancouver resident Don Steinke, who asked the commission to reject any proposal that would lead to additional oil trains traveling through Vancouver. Steinke also highlighted the difference between the public process in St. Helens and Vancouver. “We did 4.5 years of an environmental study for that oil terminal up there. How many years have you spent writing an environmental study?”

The final language of the Port’s approved resolution was not made available to the public until it was posted to the port website on Dec. 14, two days after their vote. At the hearing, many people lacking access to that final resolution directed their comments not just at API changes, but also to a proposal, published in *The Columbian* and *The Daily News*, that would have expanded the permitted length of trains from 1 mile to 1.5 miles. Port officials now say that changing the length of trains was never under consideration and do not know the source of this information.

What’s next

Last June the state’s Public Utilities Commission approved the sale of additional storage tanks to Global Partners which would increase its total storage capacity to 58 million gallons – or 1.38 million barrels of oil. By comparison Vancouver Energy, which would have been the country’s largest oil-by-rail facility, had a planned storage capacity of 2.25 million barrels.

The Columbia Pacific Bio-Refinery at Port Westward came equipped with two 3.8 million gallon storage tanks – equivalent to 180,000 barrels of oil. According to Paula Miranda, Deputy Executive Director of the Port of St. Helens, the sale of these additional storage tanks has not yet been finalized, as the company is seeking new customers to make the deal viable. Miranda says expanding the range of oils moved through the facility may help make the tank sale more attractive.

According to Miranda, the facility is currently restricted to receiving 24-unit trains per month, and is allowed to ship 38 trains per month if certain rail improvements are completed. There are no

restrictions to maritime shipments of oil or methanol from the port, and according to Miranda.

In March 2014, the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality fined Global Partners \$102,292 for shipping nearly six times its permitted quantity of oil – moving 297 million gallons between Dec. 2012 and Nov. 2013. It was only permitted to move 50 million gallons annually. In August of that year, the Oregon DEQ approved a permit allowing Global to move 1.8 billion gallons of oil every year – enough to fill 50 trains per month.

New legislation

In the aftermath of the 2016 oil train derailment in Mosier, two pieces of legislation were proposed in the Oregon State Legislature to address oil train safety – House Bill 2131, sponsored by Rep. Barbara Smith Warner of Portland, and Senate Bill 7, sponsored by Sen. Peter Courtney. Both bills failed in 2017, and are expected to be reconsidered in the 2019 legislative session.

HB 2131 would have required railroads to submit emergency response and contingency plans related to hazardous materials to state regulators – including the state Fire Marshal and Oregon Department

of Environmental Quality. These provisions are supported by the Hood River City Council, Mosier City Council, and the Hood River County Board of Commissioners.

According to Dan Serres of Columbia Riverkeeper, what happens next at Port

Westward will largely depend on whether state leaders are willing to address oil train safety in 2019.

“Oregon is going to continue to be targeted for this type of traffic – oil train traffic – until or unless someone in state government stands up to this industry,” says Serres.

And the immediate question, says Serres, is whether the DEQ decides to

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take a hard look at risks from the facility – something that has not yet happened since it began moving oil in 2012. “This is a problem, to be honest, that Oregon doesn’t have more of a process for evaluating projects like this when they make big changes. The recipe for getting a successful oil terminal going appears to be: propose and build it as something else, and then switch it.”