

Shadow Government

MPC ignores unanimous hearing testimony against wetland parkway.

Citizens packed a hearing before the regional Metropolitan Policy Committee (MPC) last week. Not a single person testified in favor of the West Eugene Parkway (WEP) on Dec. 9. Forty-eight people testified against the \$169 million highway through wetlands.

But MPC ignored the overwhelming public outcry against the WEP. After voting 8-2 for a motion by a testy Eugene Mayor Jim Torrey to limit testimony to two minutes per person, the committee voted 8-1 for including the wetland highway in the Regional Transportation Plan.

During the hearing several committee members read, talked among each other and left the table and came back. The vote came immediately after the hearing, with almost no discussion of the testimony and before reading any of the written material submitted that day by those testifying. One committee member, Coburg Mayor Judy Volta, even suggested refusing to allow people to testify.

Several citizens expressed anger at the "lack of respect" and civility the committee showed for public input in imposing the time limit and the snap decision. "It's a slap in the face," said local planning advocate Eben Fodor.

"This body is alienating a lot of the public," said Nancy Ellen Locke.

Eugene City Councilor Bonny Bettman was the sole vote against the WEP plan on the MPC. She said the MPC "disrespected" the citizens testifying. "Nobody is really considering what they say."

"It was terribly wrong," Eugene City Councilor Betty Taylor said of the MPC's "rude" treatment of citizens. "They were ignored."

The hearing shined a rare public spotlight on the MPC — an obscure, undemocratic shadow government that nevertheless wields enormous power over hundreds of millions of dollars of taxpayer money and makes decisions that have dramatic effects on local livability, environmental protection and urban sprawl.

Few citizens understand the multi-layer, alphabet soup bureaucracy that gives the MPC its power. The federal government requires larger urban regions to have Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) and gives them the power to approve or deny big federal highway

projects. The governor of Oregon designated the Lane Council of Governments (LCOG) as the local MPO.

LCOG is itself an obscure, undemocratic but powerful shadow government. LCOG's convoluted charter specifies that its governing board of directors include representatives from all the public agencies, including cities, service districts, school districts, etc. in the county. Each member city gets a vote, meaning that Eugene with 144,640 people gets the same number of votes as Dunes City with 1,300 people.

The LCOG charter does include a "one person, one vote" provision that allows voting power on the board proportional to population, but it's rarely invoked. Although voting is rarely democratic, cities pay LCOG dues every year to fund the agency based on population.

In 2001, the LCOG board voted to officially adopt the powerful and controversial TransPlan dictating highway spending in the local area, even though most of the board members had not attended the many public hearings on the plan.

The full LCOG board rarely meets and in reality many decisions are apparently left to LCOG staff. In past years LCOG staff have been criticized for working without direction from elected officials to lobby against state rules requiring more alternative transportation, and for wetland destruction permits for Hynix.

"Staff is running the show; it's the tail wagging the dog," Bettman said of LCOG.

In 2002, LCOG delegated its MPO power to the MPC. By charter the MPC voting members include two elected officials from Eugene, Lane County and Springfield and one from Coburg. MPC members with the power to vote also include three unelected members: two from the governor appointed LTD board and one from the Oregon Department of Transportation. The MPC charter includes a provision allowing Eugene, Lane County or Springfield to veto any MPC vote if both delegates from the city/county vote no.

That didn't happen last week. Mayor Torrey has been one of the biggest boosters of the WEP, spearheading a successful 2001 campaign that narrowly passed a vote supporting the parkway.

But citizens testified that today's WEP is far different from the one passed three years ago.

The price of the project has doubled to \$169 million and includes a huge new interchange at Beltline and a provision for transferring responsibility for maintaining a proportion of the highway to the City of Eugene.

"This is not what people voted on," said Jan Spencer of Citizens for Public Accountability, noting the huge cost increase.

Locke called the former vote on the much lower price tag a "bait and switch."

Bettman said the MPC should respect the prior citizen vote and moved to amend the transportation plan to include only the \$88 million and original project description people voted for. No one supported her motion.

Several people testified that unfunded improvements to Beltline and other dangerous existing roads were far more important than the WEP. Barbara Shields said she's afraid her young daughter will have an accident on Beltline trying to get home. "It puts the fear into you."

timony against the WEP. "I have not heard one comment in favor of the West Eugene Parkway, and I'd like to think we still live in a democracy."

Torrey dismissed the testimony, claiming that given time, he could "find the same number of people to testify the other way."

"Where are they?" several citizens asked.

WEP supporters argued that an immediate vote was needed on the transportation plan to meet a federal deadline to avoid losing funding. But Bettman said the MPC could have avoided funding problems by simply removing the WEP from the plan to allow for more consideration and testimony while passing other parts of the plan.

Bettman said she suspects the true reason for the rushed vote was that supporters wanted to pass the plan with the WEP before newly elected Mayor Kitty Piercy replaced Torrey on the MPC, leaving the WEP open to a possible Eugene veto vote. "There's so much manipula-

'This body is alienating a lot of the public.'

— *Nancy Ellen Locke.*

Several other people said that while the WEP will waste wetlands and taxpayer money, it will only benefit a few special interests. "The only beneficiaries are a couple of contractors and a few land speculators," Anne Montgomery testified.

Rich Hazel said Los Angeles demonstrated that you can't pave your way out of traffic jams. The WEP "doesn't work, it's too expensive, it's not as advertised, it doesn't pass the sniff test," Hazel testified. "You can't put any more lipstick on this pig."

Much of the testimony focused on the severe impact the WEP will have by driving a major freeway through a rare, sensitive and scenic west Eugene wetland preserve.

Threatened butterflies and their host flowers are struggling to recover in the preserve, botanist Mary O'Brien testified. "The proposed West Eugene Parkway would utterly rip that recovery arc in half."

Environmental educator Sharon Blick said the WEP would road kill many rare turtles and butterflies in an area that kids love for its natural beauty. "I've never met a kid that would rather have a highway than a wetland."

Marcy Cauthorn noted the unanimity of tes-

tion happening behind the scenes," Bettman said in an interview.

Members of Friends of Eugene testified that the lack of required citizen involvement on the transportation plan has left the process open to legal action.

Bettman said MPC was originally conceived as a forum for intergovernmental conflict resolution but has now gone way beyond that in setting vital government policy without accountability. Bettman helped pass a council resolution calling for votes on transportation projects before they go to MPC. But she said city staff have not followed the council order.

Councilor Taylor said the new Eugene mayor and council coming next month could change things on the MPC. She said the unrepresentative body should limit itself to intergovernmental discussions and leave the real policy decisions to the open meetings of elected and accountable city councilors.

Bettman says the unrepresentative and opaque MPC has repeatedly "totally disenfranchised" the many citizens in Eugene critical of the WEP and other highway projects. As a frequent minority of one on the MPC, Bettman said, "I am constantly astounded." **EW**



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