

Rail advisory board delays recommendation



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It's now more than just neighbors and state agencies taking note of Portland-Vancouver Junction Railroad's controversial road project in the Chelatchie Bluff Mineral Lands area. On Monday, the Clark County Railroad Advisory Board decided to hold off on making any recommendation to the county council in support of the railroad.

Board members said they wanted more information about the project, possible impacts from the work and whether the project was subject to federal, state or local permit regulations.

Advisory board member Jim Pearson said he's worked on and supervised fish habitat restoration projects and that feeder streams like those near the railroad often dry up in the summer. While he didn't dispute what residents

are saying, he did want more information.

“I would like to ask that the county staff verify what exactly was the damage done, so we on this board know what damage was done naturally and what was done because of the railroad’s activities,” Pearson said.

Kevin Tyler from Public Works said much of the information the board is looking for will come from reports issued by the state Department of Ecology and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers as each agency completes its investigation.

“I was upset at the last meeting, and I’m still a little upset,” Vice Chair John Schaffer said. “We asked Nathan Bruce (PVJR All Politics From Page C1 chief operating officer) if this project was big enough to require a grading permit by the county, and he said no.”

Schaffer said they learned shortly after that wasn’t completely accurate.

Schaffer said they also asked if the road work had anything to do with mining and were again told no.

Eric Temple, president of the railroad, has said the railroad and its work is under the oversight of the Federal Railroad Administration and is exempt from state and local regulations.

“(The railroad) has sole authority over railroad construction, and the activities we envision in Chelatchie fall well within the historic railroad construction activities which require no permits from Clark County,” Temple said in a March email to County Attorney Leslie Lopez.

Portland-Vancouver Junction Railroad, also known as PVJR, began clearing property south of Chelatchie Creek and State Route 503 in September.

After residents living nearby raised the alarm about impacts to streams and wetlands in the area, the Corps of Engineers, Ecology, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and Clark County staff and council members visited the site to assess the project and related damages.

Representatives from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries division are scheduled to visit the site next week.

Chelatchie resident Andrew Collins, who lives adjacent to the property where

the road work is being done, spoke about issues with the project during the board's public comment period. Collins said he's not opposed to the railroad itself but rather the way this project has been executed.

"I'm not against the railroad. I'm against a dishonest railroad," Collins told the board.

Collins said he and his family moved next to the railroad knowing the railroad was there and was operating, adding his son has especially enjoyed seeing Chelatchie Prairie Railroad cars, which is not affiliated with PVJR, go by their house.

"The Chelatchie Prairie Railroad has been a wonderful neighbor to us ... PVJR is not that."

The railroad is building the gravel road to serve its nearby rail yard. Temple said the road building and rail yard expansion is being done in anticipation of Granite Construction Co.'s proposed gravel mine nearby beginning operations.

"The ruling of the hearings board was essentially that the probability that the mine was going to happen was virtually certain," Temple said in an Oct. 6 interview.

On Oct. 23, Ecology and the Corps of Engineers notified the railroad it would need to apply for related permits within 30 days and that all work related to the project would need to be halted in the interim.

The Railroad Advisory Board will review its findings at its next meeting. A date for the next meeting has not been scheduled but will likely be in December.

— Shari Phiel

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