

NEXT Energy given option for renewable fuels plant

 Courtney Vaughn  Thursday, September 13, 2018



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Company enters agreement with Port of Columbia County to study feasibility of renewable diesel plant in Clatskanie

NEXT Energy, a biofuels company looking to develop an estimated \$1.1 billion plant near Port Westward, was approved for a site development and option agreement with the Port of Columbia County.

Port commissioners voted unanimously Wednesday, Sept. 12, to approve the option agreement. Two commissioners — Mike Avent and Patrick Trapp — attended and voted via phone conference.

The agreement does not grant permission or guarantee any project development, rather gives NEXT Energy the option to scope port property for a feasible site.

NEXT Energy pitches itself as a renewable diesel-maker. Company reps say the fuels they create are made from rendered animal fats and used vegetable and cooking oil to create a "clean" fuel that is more readily usable than biodiesel.

The energy company is proposing a large-scale plant somewhere near Port Westward Industrial Park in Clatskanie, where product would be created on site and then barged in and out.

While port commissioners appeared dazzled by the project's potential to create a major boon for Columbia County's tax base and create hundreds of new jobs, they couldn't help ignore major transit and environmental concerns.

The project would need thousands of gallons of water from the Columbia River — an estimated 10 percent of the port's total water rights.

NEXT Energy has ties to a failed project site in Odessa, Wash., where inspectors noted hazardous fuel storage conditions, among other problems.

Lou Soumas, a representative with NEXT Energy, previously told the port that he was involved with a company who agreed to take over operations at the site and "cleaned it up," but quickly left after persistent problems and misrepresentations. Soumas said the site deteriorated after his company's departure.

"We just think it's really important [to note] who the players are, and understand that Lou Soumas was a key player in that facility," Dan Serres, conservation director at Columbia Riverkeeper, told port commissioners Wednesday.

Serres noted an "abysmal track record" of what is now NEXT Energy.

In contrast, Mike Seely, who runs Seely Family Mint farm in Clatskanie, not far from Port Westward, said he doesn't oppose the project.

"I think so long as [the] company follows through on everything they're doing, then ... we're not necessarily opposed to what's going on," Seely told



SPOTLIGHT PHOTO: COURTNEY VAUGHN - Port of Columbia County commissioners discuss concerns surrounding a proposed renewable fuels plant at Port Westward during a board meeting Wednesday, Sept. 12. Pictured left to right: Commissioners Chris Iverson, Larry Erickson and Robert Keyser.

commissioners. "The key is they follow through."

One of the sticking points for previous industrial fuel plants in the county has been the use of rail to bring product in and out. A railroad runs along Highway 30 from Portland to Port Westward and, in some areas of Columbia County, divides cities, creating major traffic delays, or worse, the threat of explosive train crashes near schools and homes.

"The public can rest assured we are not going to do that because we're not going to ask for permits for it," Soumas said of transporting fuel by trains through the county.

Doug Hayes, the port's executive director, said the agency is "doing its due diligence."

"Certainly the port and staff has been digging in to this project," Hayes said Wednesday, noting the agency reached out to some of the company's financial backers to verify the project has a stable funding commitment.

Hayes also said the port checked Environmental Protection Agency records, which he noted had cleared Soumas of any fault for the mess at Odessa.



Soumas