

Proposed ‘Trojan horse’ coal plant pulls community wrong way

Dust off the history books and clean your eyeglasses: it’s time to look this coal plant “gift horse” in the mouth.

If Highwood Generating Station (HGS) is such a boon, why was it wheeled in like a Trojan horse, with voters losing their right to reject its funding just weeks before City officials signed on? With no right to reject it, perhaps HGS proponents figured this costly, risky, unhealthy coal plant could be built without a fight.

Enter Citizens for Clean Energy (CCE), a diverse mix of concerned volunteers from many political parties and all walks of life. We’re local farmers, doctors, engineers, business owners, teachers, homemakers and retirees, and we’ve spent hours exposing the many trap doors to the HGS Trojan Horse and presenting testimony to federal, state and local officials.

City Commission and Mayoral candidates need to give us honest answers before the election. Voters should ask:

- What each of the candidates has to say about our energy future.
- Why our current City Manager is determined to seal this coal plant deal before he retires?
- Why our future City Manager is required as a condition of employment to take up this ill-fated cause?
- How the promised property tax revenue from the coal plant will actually be spent.
- How “cost-based” power from the coal plant will differ from mandated “cost-based” power from Northwestern Energy (which will continue to charge for transmission no matter who generates the electricity).
- How reliable the unregulated power supply from a single coal plant will be.
- Why HGS and Electric City Power ratepayers will not benefit from oversight by the Public Service Commission?

The coal plant is promoted here because we have millions of gallons of water to evaporate in the cooling towers EACH DAY, and plenty of Big Sky to contaminate (Great Falls currently boasts the fourth cleanest air of any metropolitan area in the country). In violation of our Growth Policy, the proposed coal plant is sited on prime agricultural land of statewide importance and located where it will destroy the integrity of the Lewis and Clark National Historic Landmark and obscure our most scenic vista.

The Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) fails to consider that the coal plant would produce the annual greenhouse gas equivalent of more than 500,000 cars. The EIS clearly acknowledges adverse impacts on soils, water resources, air quality, biological resources, noise, recreation, cultural resources, visual impacts, traffic patterns, farmland and land use, waste management, and health and safety. For the EIS to conclude that these impacts would “not be significant” defies common sense and scientific reason. When I queried the contractor Mangi Environmental to provide references so that I could independently

evaluate the data upon which these pronouncements of “insignificance” were based, I was told that “such references are not specifically cited and are not available” and that such determinations of significance are derived in a process that is “an art as well as a science”.

It’s sad to see this Trojan horse is being led by paid contractors in cheerleading outfits rather than independent governmental agencies.

Because of the limited 400-foot height of the proposed stack, variable local wind patterns, an upper air inversion cap that often prevents adequate dispersion of pollutants, and a baffling effect of the Highwood Mountains, a retired local meteorologist warned that we could expect the air in Great Falls to be degraded about 25% of the time.

Permitting agencies failed to take into consideration recently published studies that have demonstrated the serious health effects of exposure to microscopic particulates, laden with poisonous heavy metals such as mercury, lead, and arsenic. These germ-size particles not only impair pulmonary function, but also circulate in the blood. I was told that it is doubtful that the latest information (such as the study of the adverse cardiovascular effects of fine particulate pollution published in Feb. 2007 *New England Journal of Medicine*) would be factored into the decision making process, because “government doesn’t work that fast”.

CCE feels so strongly about these issues that we have legally challenged both the air permit issued by the Montana Department of Environmental Quality and sued the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture and the Rural Utility Service.

It’s not that there aren’t other energy options. Governor Brian Schweitzer has publicly called the proposed Highwood combustion coal plant “dated technology”, and has increasingly distanced himself from this project while promoting zero emissions coal gasification. Montana is on the threshold of further exploiting its vast coal reserves, and if this happens, we want to be sure it is only with the least polluting existing technology and with the proven ability to economically capture and sequester carbon. Montanans have a constitutional right to a “clean and healthful environment”. If coal must be used, gasification plants should be located at the mine mouth to avoid costly transport of coal by monopolistic railroads. Before we rend open old mines and new Superfund sites in nearby Belt and Centerville, remember that we are still paying the environmental and financial price for last century’s mistakes just a coal lump’s throw from Great Falls.

Because reason fails them, Southern Montana Electric’s (SME) new scare-tactic advertisements show the lights going out in southeastern Montana if this plant isn’t built. Rest assured that the plug will not be pulled for our neighbors: **Montana is already a net exporter of electricity, and with new wind power and gas-fired turbines, we’ll literally be drowning in megawatts. Other rural electric cooperatives, like the one serving nine co-ops in central Montana, have chosen not to participate in this costly,**

risky coal plant; they're not worried about their future ability to contract for power any more than we're worried about the electricity from Montana's default supplier.

Many of us went to fifth grade here in Montana, where we learned how the fur trade, the railroads and the mining industry all profited from The Treasure State at our expense. Didn't we learn our lesson again when Goldman Sachs made off with our dams? Now we learn that BearSterns, another high profile Wall Street company, will try to sell bonds for a handsome commission to hapless investors at a time when coal is in the dumps and the likelihood of a carbon tax looms on the horizon.

Our US Senators need constant reminders of our environmental and financial concerns. Great Falls doesn't deserve the last old technology coal plant to be built in America. HGS is clearly a merchant venture, far overbuilt beyond SME's modest needs. Taxpayers should not finance such a boondoggle through the USDA Rural Utility Service. Let's harness our wind, capture the sun's energy from our blue skies, upgrade the dams, grow biofuels, use natural gas to firm wind power, and increase efficiency.

If we hitch our wagon to SME's Trojan horse, it will surely drag us all in the wrong direction.

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