

Nebraskans get their say on pipeline before State Department.

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Nebraska News Service

Opponents of the proposed Keystone XL pipeline came out in droves as the second session of federal public hearings continued into the evening Wednesday, Sept. 28.

The hearings, which took place in Lincoln’s Pershing Auditorium, were the fourth in a series of eight public hearings conducted by the State Department.

Approximately 800 people attended the afternoon and evening sessions; of these, more than 200 applied to speak.

Even though the evening hearing was extended to 8:30 p.m., only 164 people had the chance to speak.

The hearings comprise the final step in the department’s decision to grant or deny Trans Canada a presidential permit to build the Keystone XL oil pipeline across the Canadian-American border. The decision will be made at the end of this year.

Emotions ran high for both advocates and opponents. Opponents primarily discussed the risk the pipeline and its contents posed for the Ogallala aquifer, but also brought up concerns about what they called TransCanada’s “bullying” of Nebraska land owners to grant easements for construction of the pipeline.

Bold Nebraska, the Sierra Club and other opponents of the proposed pipeline were a sea of red in the audience.

Many of them wore black armbands with a heart around the words “Sandhills and Ogallala Aquifer Lover.”

“At 12 years old, I don’t belong to a clique or a political party, but I believe this is wrong,” Della Wilson of Bellevue, the youngest speaker of the day, said. “Your decision will affect me, my children and my grandchildren. Oil and jobs are important, but they are not required to sustain life. Water is.”

On the other side, advocates of the pipeline stressed the economic benefit the pipeline would have for the state. Many also pointed to the jobs the pipeline would bring to Nebraska.

“TransCanada has stood by their joint labor agreement and provided great wages, health insurance for workers and their families, and retirement pension plans,” Ronald Kaminski said. Kaminski is the business manager of Laborers Union Local 1140 of Omaha.

Sen. Tony Fulton of Lincoln urged the State Department to move the pipeline’s route east, nearer to the route already used by TransCanada for its Keystone Phase I pipeline, or deny the permit. Fulton said, “Pay heed to the people of Nebraska, and pay heed to the land of Nebraska, particularly the Sandhills, for there is no other place on earth like it.”

Fulton said he understands the need for jobs and would like to see energy sources coming from friends, rather than enemies.

However, he said the route of the pipeline still needs to be changed.

Wayne Frost, Lancaster County Farmer’s Union president, said he thinks the pipeline will be safer if moved to the east, and that the pipeline will create more jobs for Nebraska.

“I’m looking at my orange-clad fellow Americans,” Frost said, addressing the union crowd. “I think they need the jobs, and we can get those jobs for them. All we need is their help to get the

pipeline moved to where it ought to be.”

Union members from Local 1140, many of whom travelled from Iowa, showed their support of the pipeline by wearing orange.

They argued that the pipeline would be safe and would provide jobs and tax benefits to the state.

Lancaster County Commissioner Brent Smoyer said he was jealous of counties that would receive extra tax revenue from the pipeline increasing its property valuation. He also said he would “love to see the unemployment rate drop” in Nebraska.

Another public hearing was to be held in Nebraska at West Holt High School in Atkinson on Sept. 29.

State Department officials Theresa Hobgood and Michael Stewart led the public hearing. Hobgood said the department has not made a final decision concerning the TransCanada pipeline proposal. The hearings are solely for public comments, which will be considered as the department makes its final decision later this year, she said.

Public comments will be accepted by the State Department until midnight eastern daylight time Oct. 9. Comments may be emailed to keystonexl-nid@cardno.com. Or, mail comments to: Keystone XL Project NID, P.O. Box 96503-98500, Washington, D.C. 20090-6503.