

Commissioners continue decision on metro district

By Ashley Dieterle | Posted: Friday, July 29, 2011 9:00 am

Concerned Elbert County residents can rest easy for at least a month, after another extension was made on the decision to approve or disapprove an amendment to the service plan for the Elbert and Highway 86 Commercial Metropolitan District.

More than 300 people attended the July 27 Elbert Board of County Commissioner meeting that was held in the Exhibit Hall at the Elbert County Fairgrounds. After residents showed concern at the previous BOCC meeting on July 13, the applicant asked the board for a 30-day extension, which was granted after a unanimous vote.

"We would like the extension to be able to utilize this meeting and hear the comments from the public," said Karl Nyquist, director of the Elbert and Highway 86 Metropolitan District. "We believe it is a very important issue for Elbert County and we want to hear more from the public. We have heard very reasonable concerns, and we need to address those concerns."

The proposal up for concern is an amendment to the district's service plan that would allow them to build a 150-mile pipeline from southeastern Colorado, near Lamar, up to Elbert County in an effort to provide a renewable water resource. The water would be transported from the Arkansas River, to Elbert County. The half-a-billion dollar project would take around 10 years to complete, but could be the beginning of taking a proactive approach to future development.

"We have seen a decrease in growth and development, but that is temporary and whether or not you want it, development will happen," said Richard Miller, director of Elbert County community and development services. "It is my strong belief that we need a renewable water source in Elbert County and this proposed amendment will supplement the water in the aquifers that we are currently relying on for water."

Although Miller urged the approval, many county residents did not. The majority of the public comment during the meeting stressed to the commissioners to take their time in their decision. Elbert County Resident Larry Ross explained to the board the lack of knowledge concerning the project and the people behind it.

"I don't know who these people are and what their experiences are," he said. "These people need Elbert County, but Elbert County doesn't need these people. There are a lot of questions, and all I would say is, not you, not now, not here."

A big concern to residents is funding for the project. Nyquist informed the board and the public that funding would come from those who voluntarily choose to use the district's services. Those customers would pay back the debt incurred by the project through water service fees and tap fees, he said. Any commercial entities that use the district's services would pay a monthly Public Improvement Fee that Nyquist said would be negotiated among the county, the district and the commercial entity.

"There is no cost to the county, unless anyone voluntarily enters into a contract with the district," he said.

Another big concern made by the public was whether or not the district would provide water to oil and gas companies. Dianne Miller, also representing the Elbert and Highway 86 Metro District, said stopping the approval of the amendment will not stop the oil and gas industry from coming to Elbert County. Therefore, if an oil and gas company comes to the district wanting the district to provide water, the district would provide the water, she said.

"We can't choose who we can serve in our service area," she said. "So yes, we would provide water to the oil and gas companies. And if we aren't here to provide the water, the oil and gas companies will find a way to get water no matter what it takes."

The ultimate decision was continued by the board until the Aug. 24 board meeting, but before then Nyquist and his team are hosting two informational public meetings at 7 p.m. on Aug. 11 and Aug. 17. One meeting will be near the Elizabeth area and the other near the Simla area. Exact locations are not set yet, but can be found on the county's website at www.elbertcounty-co.gov in the future.

For a copy of the staff report on the amendment to the service plan for the Elbert and Highway 86 Commercial Metro District, contact community and development services at 303-621-3136.