

Council vetoes EWEB bond vote

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The Eugene City Council on Wednesday killed the idea of asking voters to approve the \$85.5 million financing plan for the Eugene Water & Electric Board's new operations center.

EWEB officials met with councilors because the council on Feb. 25 will be asked to approve the bonds to pay for the utility's proposed complex, on the southeast corner of Roosevelt Boulevard and Belt Line Road.

Under state law, EWEB does not have to refer the bonds to voters unless 5 percent of city voters sign petitions for a vote within 60 days of the council's approval.

Councilor Bonny Bettman said the council has not been able to "weigh in" on the utility's reliance on debt to finance the complex. She suggested that EWEB officials think of ways to reduce the cost of the project and consider "reshuffling" priorities.

She asked her colleagues to make the bond financing dependent upon voter approval in the May 20 election. "I just want (EWEB officials) to make their case to voters," she said.

But the council voted 5-3 against Bettman's idea.

EWEB's West Eugene buildings will have "green" elements, such as natural lighting and solar hot water heating. The utility hopes its complex will achieve a gold rating from the U.S. Green Building Council, which would be one of only two or three buildings in Eugene with that designation.

But EWEB has cut other environmental features — such as rooftop photovoltaic solar panels to generate electricity — in order to save money.

That drew criticism from Councilor Alan Zelenka, a former manager for the Emerald People's Utility District and now an energy consultant with Kennedy/Jenks, an engineering and environmental sciences firm.

Zelenka said he was disappointed that the photovoltaic panels were dropped. "If EWEB isn't doing solar PV, who will?" he said.

Zelenka said he favored voters having a say because \$85.5 million is a lot of money. The proposal could be an "easy sell" to voters, he said, especially if EWEB reinstated the photovoltaic panels.

The utility estimates that the sale of bonds for the center will increase customer rates by about \$52 a year for a typical residential customer. That amount could be cut by nearly half, however, if EWEB ultimately sells the Willamette riverfront property it will vacate and applies the anticipated \$30 million sale proceeds toward the Roosevelt Boulevard project. Mayor Kitty Piercy urged councilors to endorse EWEB's financing because it would allow the utility to move its operations yard from its downtown riverfront property.

A yet-to-be created master plan will guide the conversion of the industrial yard to other uses and thereby help connect the city to the riverfront, Piercy said.

She told councilors that she would vote against Bettman's proposal if she had to break a council tie. "I think the public is eager to have this opportunity to have more access to the river," she said.

The council, like the elected EWEB board, is accountable to the public and "we are given the (city) charter responsibility to decide these things," Piercy said.

Piercy did not have to vote because only Councilor Betty Taylor joined Bettman and Zelenka to support Bettman's proposal. Opposed were councilors George Poling, Jennifer Solomon, Chris Pryor, Andrea Ortiz and Mike Clark.

"All of us can see the clear benefit to the city," Solomon said of EWEB's plans.
