

Petitioners fail to refer EWEB proposal to ballot

By Jeff Wright, The Register-Guard, Published: April 29, 2008

Petitioners have failed to gather enough signatures to refer to the ballot a Eugene Water & Electric Board proposal to spend up to \$85.5 million in revenue bonds for a new operations complex.

By Monday's deadline, volunteers had gathered just over 2,000 voter signatures — less than half the 4,208 they needed — to refer the matter to voters, said Joshua Schlossberg, treasurer for the Our Utility Our Vote citizen campaign.

"It was not for lack of interest" among voters, Schlossberg said. "We just underestimated the number of folks we needed" to serve as unpaid signature gatherers.

EWEB President John Simpson said the failed attempt is good news for the utility, which had said that a public vote in September would mean a one-year project delay and a \$4 million to \$6 million increase in construction costs.

Instead, EWEB commissioners will vote next week on approving a \$61.4 million contract with general contractor Lease Crutcher Lewis of Portland, with groundbreaking on the new complex in west Eugene able to begin in July.

The unsuccessful petition campaign "is reassuring to us because we've been hearing from our customers for the last two years that they understand our need to replace aging facilities," Simpson said. "This underscores and reinforces that."

The failed effort also means that the process of deciding how to redevelop about 20 acres of EWEB's choice riverfront property can go forward, Simpson said. The acreage will be vacated when the utility moves its operations complex — vehicle shops, warehouse, operations building and storage yard — to its new 52-acre site on the southeast corner of Roosevelt Boulevard and Belt Line Road.

Petitioners had less than three weeks to gather the necessary signatures after failing to submit the necessary paperwork by April 8. If organizers had filed earlier, giving themselves a full 60 days to gather signatures, "we definitely would have pulled it off," Schlossberg said.

Organizers waited because they could not initially decide among themselves whether they wanted to take on EWEB on the issue, he said.

The referendum drive marked the first time an EWEB bond proposal had been challenged since the enactment of a 1993 state law that allows the utility to issue bonds with just the approval of the City Council.

The law requires a public vote only if a petition referendum is successful.

After a previous 5-3 vote against referring the matter to voters, the City Council in late February voted unanimously, with one councilor absent, to approve the bond measure without a public vote.

Schlossberg identified four main objections to the project cited by petition signers: the fact that the new operations complex is being built on wetlands; the rate increase associated with the project; the wisdom of building a new equipment yard in an era of climate change and resource depletion; and a feeling that EWEB failed to adequately publicize the project.

EWEB estimates that the project's bonds will increase a typical residential customer's combined water and electric bill by 2.6 percent, or about \$52 a year.

That increase could be cut by about half, however, once proceeds from selling the utility's vacated riverfront property are applied to the project, EWEB officials have said.

The utility plans to preserve about 4 acres of high-quality wetlands on the site and will restore another 7 acres.

It also intends to spend about \$435,000 in the West Eugene Wetlands Mitigation Bank to buy or restore an additional 8.7 acres of wetlands elsewhere.

Schlossberg said he feels that petitioners definitely raised public awareness about the issue. "Just not starting early enough, that's my only regret," he said.