

McCloud to seek Nestle talks at 'higher level'

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By Charlie Unkefer

McCloud, Calif. - Scout Hall in McCloud was packed Monday night as the Community Services District board of directors discussed the issue of whether or not to pursue a re-negotiated contract with Nestle to build a water bottling plant in McCloud.

Though only one of two new business agenda items, it was the primary concern for most of the 70 people in attendance. As expected, many commented on the issue, expressing a spectrum of opinion.

After almost three hours of board discussion, a review of communications – letters submitted to the board prior to the meeting, expressing a myriad of opinions – and public comment, the board passed a motion 5-0 to “address the issues with higher level Nestle executives.”

Though the issue listed on the meeting agenda cited “discussion/action regarding a request... to enter into new contract negotiations,” the motion passed focused only on continued dialogue, with a tone of caution prevailing.

Director comment runs gamut

Director Tim Dickinson, who first brought the issue to the table in his opening comments on the project, noted, “What I need is a conversation with the executive level of Nestle to find out what direction they are going in... I would hate to go six months or one or two years and then have the contract dropped. My idea is to have that contact and have discussion.”

That sentiment was furthered by director Schoenstein, who stated, “I am willing to go forward, but Nestle’s management needs to participate.” Schoenstein expressed his consternation over the way communications between Nestle and the MCSD has gone to date, noting, “National (media) coverage has been intense, but no one has come to talk to us.”

Schoenstein also expressed his interest in conducting a thorough survey of the community’s desires around the issue. “We need to know where the public stands,” he stated, emphasizing that this information would better inform the board as they continue their discussions with Nestle. However, Schoenstein, remained cautious, “There is no need to hurry or fear that if we don’t (re-negotiate now) that Nestle will leave.”

Director Kleinhans stated, “It is time to move forward directly and methodically.” He suggested starting an ad-hoc committee that would focus on the issue and report back to the board. The committee, as presented by Kleinhans, would be

entrusted with the job of informing the board on issues germane to managing negotiations with Nestle.

This issue became central to discussions and comments, with many wondering what such a committee would look like and what the scope of their duties would be.

Director Simons spoke next, reiterating the importance of developing a survey tool that would better help the District get a clearer picture of the prevailing views of McCloud residents. "There is nothing that I have found that shows me that the majority does not want a water bottling plant," said Simons. She expressed her opinion that she felt entering re-negotiation could be beneficial. "Meetings (between Nestle and the community) could be run by a non-biased facilitator," suggested Simons. Expressing deep concerns over any decision to move forward with negotiation, Director Stewart addressed what he deemed the "dependence versus independence" issue. "I want to open this up so it's not just 'us and them' (Nestle)... Let's get in a position where this is not the only thing on the table." Stewart's contention was that there are a variety of options that the community could explore, not just Nestle.

Stewart expressed a litany of other reservations, including his feelings that the district is in need of new legal counsel to better represent the community on the issue, as well as concerns that NAFTA regulations could allow the multi-national corporation to bypass local ordinances. He concluded by saying, "I ask the board to put this off."

Public comments

Public comments addressed a variety of concerns and represented a full spectrum of views. Many maintained their outright disapproval of the project, citing no interest whatsoever in contract negotiations.

Claudia Ellis reminded the board, "We are not the only town having troubles," speaking of the stressors placed on many communities, especially given the current beleaguered economy. However, urged Ellis, "We can do it ourselves. Do not sell your soul to the devil."

Also opposed to any deal with Nestle was Bill Corbel, who cautioned, "Once a multi-national does business in a community, all local control is lost." Corbel's interests in developing a more locally based business economy were shared by many.

Woodie Lowe didn't mince his words with the board. "Stop waiting for Nestle to guide your actions," he said.

Lowe's list of concerns included his desire to see a MCSD natural resource policy, a revised Water Master Plan, and a "thorough assessment" of NAFTA

policy. Speaking on the idea of a special ad-hoc committee to handle the issue, Lowe stated his disapproval. "Buck up like everyone else," he said, implying that the Nestle issue should be handled directly by the board.

Mark Miyoshi, a Mount Shasta representative for the Winnemem-Wintu Tribe, spoke of the tribe's adamant opposition to the project. "We vigorously oppose any kind of contract," Miyoshi said.

He spoke of the importance of water to the tribe, saying, "Water for us is sacred... For us, the exportation of water means part of who we are is gone... It is tampering with our own identity and heritage."

In a call to promote sustainable development practices, Miyoshi asked rhetorically, "Where have these problems come from?" His answer: "Resource extraction takes wealth out of the community, but what does it do? You're giving away your legacy."

A call for 'due diligence'

Others expressed concerns, more specifically, over the apparent expedience of the current re-negotiating process.

Curtis Knight of Cal-Trout cited the importance of reviewing biological and hydrological studies before any action is made. He noted that there is data currently being collected by the consulting firm Northstate Resources, who is working under contract with Nestle, and that there will be valuable data available in 2010. "I support the methodology being used," said Knight.

Deborah Anderson, president of the McCloud Watershed Council, implored the board to explore Nestle's track record in other communities. "I would encourage the community to have a forum with other communities that have had a (Nestle) water bottling plant." Anderson noted specific cases in which Nestle plants were damaging communities and ecosystems, often leaving a legacy of legal battles and sustained animosities, such as the high profile case involving a Poland Spring (a subsidiary of Nestle) plant in Fryeburg, Maine. Other citizens spoke to the issue of the multi-national corporation's poor environmental and ethical track record and encouraged further investigation into these cases, as well. In support of negotiation

Not all public comment expressed opposition to contract negotiations with Nestle.

Dorris Dragseth spoke to the issue of the declining economy and the financial struggles faced by many in McCloud. "We are pricing people right out of the community. Where is the district going to get the money?" inquired Dragseth. Kelly Claro noted, "I encourage talks with Nestle and with each other. We need to find out things."

Bruce French, a past McCloud general manager, enthusiastically endorsed the process he saw unfolding in Scout Hall. "This is fabulous. Democracy in Action!" said French.

He continued by noting the expenses involved in maintaining the services district, citing specifically the issue of replacing the existing in-town water system. "We have major expenses, and the people currently living in town cannot afford this... We need money, and I'm for a source of income."

Ron Berryman spoke in praise of the board's initial comments. "I'm encouraged that you are looking at the facts and figures," he told the board. He noted that the overall process, to date, has already taken five years, stating "we've lost jobs in those five years." Endorsing cautious movement toward a re-negotiation process, Berryman concluded, "If it's another year or so, so be it."

Ken Anderson reminded the board that the formation of an "ad-hoc committee is a separate issue than what was put on the board agenda. "The question here seems to be 'Is it business as usual with Dave (Palais) or not?'"

Nestle representative Dave Palais, though present, did not comment on the issue.

Deliberation on the motion

After hearing public comment, the board discussed the emergent issues but returned to the primary agenda item, the issue of re-negotiation with Nestle, revisiting the earlier recommendation that the MCSD have "dialogue with "higher level Nestle executives." The board passed a motion 5-0 in support of the idea, tabling the budding discussions over the formation of an ad-hoc committee and the issue of developing a survey for a later meeting.

The board's decision to promote dialogue with higher level Nestle officials reflected a strong sentiment to "proceed with caution."

"I don't think the board will make any concrete decisions in their continued dialogue with Nestle, so I would definitely not characterize it as 'entering contract re-negotiations,'" said Cal-Trout's Curtis Knight, reflecting on the content of the meeting in a follow-up interview.

"I saw the board's decision as a very positive thing and a reflection of many people's concerns to proceed slowly and cautiously," furthered Knight. Board president Dickinson, in a short conversation on Tuesday, said, "I thought it was a very positive meeting from the standpoint that people were talking and looking for the best way to proceed."

When asked whether the board's motion could, in any way, be construed as the beginning of a contract negotiation, Dickinson said no. "What we're doing is

trying to get information to see what exactly they want to do... We will need to get a lot of information before we launch into any negotiations.”

Future meetings

The MCSD board of directors meets regularly on the 2nd and 4th Mondays at 7 p.m. in Scout Hall in McCloud, with the next scheduled meeting on Feb. 9.

Nestle will be conducting a “community forum” on its interest in a re-negotiated contract with the MCSD on Feb. 18 at 7 p.m. at McCloud Elementary School.