

Bottling plant looks to Orting after snubbing by Enumclaw

As criticism of bottled water grows, two Cascade foothills communities are approached about hosting a major bottling plant. Enumclaw says no. Orting is intrigued.

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By Mike Archbold

The City of Enumclaw has upped the ante on what it means to be a “green-friendly” community by rejecting a bid by a Nestle corporation to build a 100 million-gallon water bottle plant there.

Now it’s Orting’s turn to decide if it wants Nestle Waters North America to tap into the city’s water source, fed by three mountain springs.

Growing environmental concerns about bottled water have recently led to bans by cities such as Seattle and San Francisco.

But Orting Mayor Cheryl Temple said talks with Nestle are just beginning and she wants to give the company the opportunity to make its case.

She said unfounded fear about plastic bottles won’t run the company out of Orting.

“I think if we learn exactly what plastic bottles mean to the environment, I don’t think the community will turn away,” Temple said. “We are at least going to hear them out. I don’t think that’s what Enumclaw did.”

The estimated 45 jobs that a plant would bring to the community are an important consideration, she added.

Temple said she already has heard from Enumclaw residents opposed to a bottling plant and expects more outside opposition.

Carolyn May of Enumclaw was one of those who spoke against the plant at an Enumclaw City Council meeting last month. She said she plans to contact Orting officials to let them know what she’s learned about Nestle and plastic bottles.

Her opposition, she said, stems from the oil required to manufacture and transport the bottles and their impact on the environment.

In Enumclaw, fears about global warming and adequate future water supplies for the community dominated the debate. But like elsewhere in the country, residents also expressed concerns about the ubiquitous containers that end up on beaches and roadsides.

Good ol' tap water is cheaper and doesn't need to be recycled, they point out.

NESTLE LOOKS NORTHWEST

Over the past five years, bottled water sales have been a growth juggernaut driven primarily by single-serve plastic containers, according to the Beverage Marketing Corp.

Between 2002 and 2007, the consumption of bottled water in the U.S. alone has jumped from 20.1 to 29.1 gallons per capita.

Nestle Waters North America reigns as the top purveyor of bottled water in the U.S., with sales of \$3.8 billion last year. On the West Coast, it markets mountain spring water under the brand name Arrowhead.

It has 26 bottling plants throughout the country and is looking to build its first in the Northwest.

Even though Enumclaw officials determined there was enough water to supply the plant, the people spoke loudly against it. The City Council listened, turning down the proposal last week by a 6-1 vote.

Enumclaw Mayor John Wise said before the June 23 vote that he opposed the plant, saying he "believed the community has spoken with their opposition in letters, phone calls, in person."

Councilman Jim Beckwith was the lone no vote, saying the plant had the potential to create jobs as well as an ongoing revenue source for the city. He wanted more time to see if the city could negotiate a deal with Nestle that alleviates community concerns.

Nestle's proposal was to draw up to 100 million gallons of water annually via pipeline directly from the city's Boise Spring water source, which generates 1 million gallons of water per day.

The 250,000-square-foot plant would have generated an estimated traffic flow of 50 to 100 trucks a day in and out of the community, according to Enumclaw City Administrator Mark Bauer.

Fears over living with a big multinational company, concerns about future water supply in a time of global warming, increased truck traffic and the impact of plastic bottles on nature doomed the deal, Bauer said.

WEIGHING THE OPTIONS

Dave Palais, a spokesman with the Greenwich, Conn.,-based Nestle Water North America, said officials were disappointed with the Enumclaw decision to end discussions after more than a year of talks.

He said he wished Nestle had had the opportunity to talk more to the community about the benefits the plant could bring.

The company, he said, is looking at other communities in Washington and Oregon, including Orting.

“They are interested in how it would work, if we can do it in a way to benefit the community and not hurt the environment,” Palais said of the East Pierce County valley city of nearly 6,000 residents.

Orting City Administrator Mark Bethune said both Nestle and the city are doing their own “due diligence” to see if a plant would be a good fit. He said the city doesn’t know if it has enough water to supply the plant.

Bethune said the company has shown some interest in the 50-acre Engfer farm that is for sale along Highway 162 in the north part of Orting. The proposed 250,000-square-foot plant would need 25 to 30 acres and generate perhaps 45 jobs.

“Some aspects are attractive; some are not,” he said.

Traffic produced by the plant is certainly a consideration, said Temple, the mayor. Highway 162 is the main route in and out of Orting and jams up daily at rush hour.

When told the plant could add 50 trucks a day to roads, Temple said she cringed.

“It’s something certainly to look at,” she added.

BOTTLED WATER DEBATE

The debate over plastic water bottles has irked industry defenders.

Both Enumclaw and Orting are Cascade foothills communities that enjoy natural mountain spring water – a combination that makes them valuable to Nestle.

The company needs water from that type of sources to market its Arrowhead brand as mountain spring water.

Palais said the solution to environmental concerns about plastic bottles is a strong recycling program that targets all plastic products. He said that less than a half percent of municipal waste in landfills is in the form of plastic bottles.

In a speech to the Beverage Forum in May, Kim Jeffery, president of Nestle Waters North America, defended its product.

“Taxing, banning or otherwise handicapping this industry will do nothing to solve municipal water problems, nor will it help with the very real problem of recycling in America,” Jeffery said.

“If bottled water went away tomorrow, there would be no less plastic used, no less water used, no improvement in recycling rates and no reduction of our collective carbon footprint,” he added.

“I’m pretty sure we’d be fatter, though, and I know Americans would have less access to healthy beverage options.”

Local governments have taken the lead recently in opposing institutional purchases of bottled water.

The U.S. Conference of Mayors passed a resolution in June calling for municipalities to limit bottled water to emergencies and rely on tap water for everyday use.

Also last month, the King County Council adopted a ban on single-serve plastic water containers by county agencies and in county buildings.

City Councilman Mayor George Dill has asked his city to stop buying plastic water bottles. He said he wouldn’t appreciate a bottling plant in nearby Orting.

To get rid of some things, Dill said, just makes good environmental sense.

“Remember Styrofoam containers for hamburgers?” he added.