

May 20, 2015

Stand Up Against Offshore Drilling

Savannah

It's time for Bluffton to join its neighbors and take a stand against oil exploration and drilling off the Atlantic coast.

Dozens of coastal municipalities have passed resolutions opposing the practices since the Obama administration announced in January a plan to open up offshore areas from Virginia to Georgia for oil and gas leases. Nearby Hilton Head Island, Beaufort, Port Royal and Savannah are among them.

Those communities are right to be wary of seismic testing for oil and the drilling that could follow. It's simply not worth the gamble, risking damage to precious ecosystems in search of oil money and jobs that are far from guaranteed.

Bluffton should be wary as well. Like its neighbors, the town relies on the tourism and seafood industries to help drive the economy. Offshore drilling and the environmental perils that come with it would endanger both of them.

So far, the town has not considered a resolution to oppose oil exploration and Mayor Lisa Sulka told Bluffton Today this month it had no plans to do so.

"We have general support for such a resolution, and I'm thrilled our neighboring municipalities have taken a stand," Sulka said. "But it's just not something I can get a unanimous support on for putting it on the council agenda. It's a critical national issue, and I wouldn't want to chance us not being completely united on this."

Sulka also cited the town's inability to control a federal plan.

"This plays directly into our goals for conservation and protecting our rivers," she said, "but I'm not sure having staff spend a full day drafting (a resolution) when they could be working on things we can directly control is the best road to take."

It's true Bluffton can't control the outcome itself, but the town still should take the time to make its voice heard. Offshore drilling is a longstanding national issue that immediately became a local one when the administration made its announcement this year.

If town leaders are against oil exploration, they owe it to their constituents and neighboring communities to join the opposition. Even an inland city like Columbia took the time to do so this month.

For all the municipalities that have stood in solidarity, there are powerful forces pushing for offshore drilling. Gov. Nikki Haley and other state leaders are for it, while oil companies and their lobbyists have the resources to wield significant influence.

The S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control recently approved Spectrum Geo Inc.'s permit to use seismic cannons to test for offshore oil and natural gas deposits. The State newspaper reported Monday that Beaufort, Charleston and Folly Beach have joined conservation groups and a seafood company in appealing the move.

This shows the fight is certainly not over, even if the opposition needs all the support it can muster. Bluffton needs to get on the right side of an absolutely critical issue.