

The Virginian-Pilot

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Beach leaders need to reverse vote, oppose drilling

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The issue: The Virginia Beach City Council is scheduled to begin discussing its 2010 endorsement of drilling off the coast.
Where we stand: It's time to protect the beaches and the Navy's interests by taking back that vote.

The Virginian-Pilot
© August 16, 2015

Virginia Beach's elected leaders have an opportunity to undo a major mistake before it does damage to the city's economy and quality of life.

Early in 2010, the Virginia Beach City Council, at the behest of favorite son and Gov. Bob McDonnell, endorsed drilling for oil and gas in the Atlantic Ocean off Virginia.

It was a favor called in by the newly elected McDonnell, and the council's dutiful Republicans faithfully complied.

"If there's going to be money made from drilling for gas, I want the city of Virginia Beach to benefit, period," said Mayor Will Sessoms, who requested the measure.

The vote came amid incredible promises of economic advantage, all of which evaporated on examination: The huge jobs projections came from an industry desperate to open the Atlantic coast to petroleum production; there was - and is - no scheme in place that would provide revenue to Virginia; the map that allocates offshore territory ensures that Virginia would get a disproportionately small share if there were ever royalties to be had.

Nevertheless, eight of 11 on the City Council voted in favor of oil and gas drilling. It was a baffling vote and decision that has only worsened with time.

For years, the Navy had written letters warning that oil and gas drilling was incompatible with its training mission over the Virginia Capes. The Navy's position has not changed.

Given the near-death experience at Oceana Naval Air Station during the deliberations of the 2005 Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission, the city took draconian measures to preserve the base's mission by reducing encroachment on its fence-line.

The City Council's defiance of the Navy's warnings about offshore drilling, just five years later, was strangely at odds with years of effort and expense to preserve Oceana's mission.

Military-related spending provides more than 40 percent of the region's economic activity and Virginia Beach's, but reduced federal spending and consolidation of operations means that's not likely to grow as it has in the past.

Perhaps strangest of all is that the Virginia Beach City Council's vote - while first sending a dangerous message to the Navy - also risks the city's other major jobs driver.

According to economic forecasters at Old Dominion University, the region's tourism revenues are heading in the opposite direction from military spending. That's especially true at Virginia Beach's reinvigorated Oceanfront.

Hoteliers and restaurateurs and others dependent on tourism traffic warned the City Council in 2010 that an oil spill could be ruinous to decades of progress.

That threat became clearer in April 2010, when the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico, killing 11 people and unleashing the largest marine oil spill in history.

The 200 million gallons of oil that spilled over nearly two months fouled hundreds of miles of beaches, killed fish and plants and dolphins and drove away tourists. It was an environmental and economic catastrophe from which some communities haven't recovered.

Despite that, Virginia Beach's City Council did nothing to reconsider its standing invitation to drill off the city's coast. That changes Tuesday with an informal discussion on the council's agenda.

Perhaps the most prosaic of answers to why the city's leaders voted as they did in 2010 is one predicated on practicality. President George Bush had been a strong proponent of offshore drilling, and had even made promises to open up the coasts to oil and gas companies.

President Barack Obama did little to move those plans forward, and the Deepwater Horizon disaster soon provided the opportunity to cancel a proposed lease-sale of Virginia's offshore territory.

In other words, Virginia Beach's elected leaders could endorse offshore drilling because it was unlikely to happen.

That's no longer true.

Earlier this year, the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management announced that it may include territory off Virginia in the 2017 lease sale.

Part of the reason is the Virginia Beach City Council's support, as recounted in a draft for the 2017-2022 outer continental shelf leasing program: "The benefits of offshore development include creation of jobs and production of millions of dollars of revenue to state and local governments. The [City Council] reaffirms its endorsement of the exploration of oil and natural gas off the coast of Virginia in Lease Sale 220 area, as long as the development takes place more than 50 miles from the coast of Virginia Beach."

The City Council urges a better royalty structure and revenue for its coffers, neither of which is likely. Even without those absolutely critical elements, it has endorsed drilling.

That endorsement - along with support from elected officials including Gov. Terry McAuliffe, U.S. Sens. Mark Warner and Tim Kaine, and U.S. Rep. Scott Rigell - was undoubtedly crucial to the federal agency's change of heart.

With McDonnell out of office, Rigell has become the most outspoken advocate for offshore drilling. But his arguments don't deviate from past promises of jobs and money, neither of which are likely, given the current regulatory environment and political realities.

Virginia Beach was mistaken to listen to McDonnell in 2010, and it would be wrong to listen to Rigell now.

Even if offshore drilling is done safely and responsibly, it remains incompatible with military operations off Virginia's coast. NASA has said it likewise imperils activities at Wallops Island. An accident risks the Virginia Beach tourism industry, in which citizens and businesses have invested billions of dollars.

In recent months, cities and communities up and down the Atlantic Coast - including Myrtle Beach last week - have voiced renewed opposition to the prospect of platforms off the beaches. Virginia Beach's hoteliers and the resort community are opposed, as is every major local, state and national environmental group.

The primary counterarguments remain those from the industry itself, which can neither ensure their accuracy nor the safety of the communities in which it hopes to operate.

Virginia Beach made a generational mistake in endorsing offshore energy in 2010. When the City Council meets Tuesday, it will begin a weeks-long discussion on whether to reconsider that vote. The time has come to make it right.

<http://hamptonroads.com/2015/08/beach-leaders-need-reverse-vote-oppose-drilling>