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Editorial: Virginia Beach back from the petroleum brink

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VIRGINIA BEACH finally took its first step away from a terrible decision that could have undone many of its smart moves through the years.

On Tuesday — the same day it approved a private proposal for a new arena near the Oceanfront — the City Council rescinded its 2010 endorsement of offshore drilling.

It stopped short of formally opposing platforms off the North End, as have communities up and down the East Coast, to say nothing of the city's own environmentalists and tourism-boosters. But it's a start.

The 2010 decision endorsing offshore drilling — coming just weeks before the Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico — never made much sense except as a political move.

Offshore oil and gas development is strenuously supported by U.S. Rep. Scott Rigell and then-Gov. Bob McDonnell, as well as Sens. Mark Warner and Tim Kaine and current Gov. Terry McAuliffe.

That advocacy persists despite the lack of a royalty structure to accrue any benefits to Virginia Beach or the state, an allocation map that shortchanges the commonwealth, and a strong and durable opposition from the Pentagon, which argues that offshore drilling is incompatible with its training mission.

To say nothing of the risk a spill would pose to the environment, to offshore fisheries, or to the Virginia Beach tourism industry.

The consequences for Virginia Beach from an accident could be enormous. The pay-off, in any case, is small: Jobs, although far fewer than advocates claim, and perhaps some support business, though much of that will remain in places like Louisiana and Texas.

In short, Virginia Beach stands to gain little from offshore drilling while risking everything.

That's the same calculus that led City Council to oppose uranium mining upstream from its water source. While the possibility of an accident there is small, it is real. Accidents connected with offshore oil and gas happen all the time.

If the city made a small shift toward recognizing that fact, it still remains out of step with Dare County and Duck and Myrtle Beach and Ocean City. All formally oppose drilling off the East Coast. Virginia Beach had better catch up.

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