

April 2, 2015

Still Time for Beach to Get Right on Drilling

Five years after the nation's worst oil spill - 200 million gallons in the Gulf of Mexico - coastal cities are finally waking up to the consequences of gambling on offshore drilling.

Last week, Charleston, S.C., approved a resolution opposing offshore drilling and seismic testing off the coast. "We don't need the money to risk the damage to our environment, to our quality of life, and to our resource," said Mayor Joe Riley.

That historic city joins at least 19 other communities in the Carolinas, including the Outer Banks' Dare County, on record opposing offshore drilling or seismic testing.

Virginia Beach should be next, as the city's Restaurant Association has said.

The Obama administration's plan to allow drilling for oil and gas in federal waters off Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia has drawn thousands of people to public hearings. Opponents listed several concerns, including damage to wildlife from seismic testing, a method of searching for oil and gas reserves using blasts of sound. The testing, the U.S. Bureau of Ocean Energy Management acknowledges, will have a "moderate impact" on marine mammals and sea turtles.

This week, a Republican state senator from South Carolina wrote about other problems associated with offshore drilling. In a column for The Island Packet in Hilton Head, Chip Campsen, who owns a passenger vessel company, wrote that he had brought his vessels to the Atlantic coast from across the Gulf of Mexico. The "land-based infrastructure necessary to support offshore drilling," he wrote, "is not a pretty sight. It is extensive, dirty and highly industrial.

"There simply is no place on South Carolina's coast appropriate for this kind of industrialization. Our coast is dominated by residential and resort development, wildlife refuges and extensive protected ecosystems."

So is Virginia Beach's.

Which parts of its coast should we industrialize? Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge? Sandbridge, the family vacation area? The resort area? Fort Story? Or perhaps First Landing State Park, a site on the National Register of Historic Places because it's where the English colonists first landed, in 1607.

Many other factors argue against drilling offshore. The risk of damage to the environment and to one of the city's greatest economic engines - tourism - in the event of a spill persuaded the restaurant association to take a stand.

"We are concerned if the program is approved, disasters like the Deepwater Horizon oil rig that exploded and killed 11 people in the Gulf of Mexico could happen here," association President Bill Gambrell and Vice President Laura Habr wrote to the federal agency. "This kind of disaster would cripple our industry and economy."

In February 2010, at the behest of then-Gov. Bob McDonnell, the Virginia Beach City Council passed a resolution supporting drilling for oil and gas off the coast: "The development of an offshore oil and gas industry would create thousands of jobs in Hampton Roads and produce hundreds of millions of dollars worth of revenue to the commonwealth and local government if the Federal Royalty Law was amended to allow not only Gulf and Pacific states but also Atlantic Coast states like Virginia to receive offshore royalties."

Given that those oil and gas jobs would be concentrated in a city with onshore industrial facilities, Virginia Beach would be eschewing the clean, family-friendly image it has worked hard for in favor of the type of development Campsen described.

Given that the federal government has shown no inclination to allocate royalties to the places that invite offshore energy development, money is unlikely to follow.

When the City Council voted for offshore drilling, two current council members opposed it: Barbara Henley, a farmer and advocate for the environment, and Vice Mayor Louis Jones.

"I just don't see where it's benefiting us," Jones said at the time. "And the risk of damage to our shoreline and our relationship to the Navy compared to any benefit just doesn't seem worth it."

Jones was right then. The council should have listened to him. The Virginia Beach Restaurant Association has opened the door to revisit the issue. It's time for the city to acknowledge that drilling poses unacceptable risks to the city's life and livelihoods.