

ABQ crowd critiques Gila diversion

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(Press Staff Photo by Benjamin Fisher)

Former ISC director, hydrological engineer, Albuquerque resident and vocal Gila diversion opponent Norm Gaume spoke before a crowd of fellow opponents to the proposed diversion of the Gila and San Francisco rivers who were protesting outside a scoping open house for the project at the State Bar of New Mexico on Monday afternoon.

Regular players in the fight against the New Mexico Unit Central Arizona Project proposed diversion of the Gila and San Francisco rivers were joined at an environmental impact statement scoping open house in Albuquerque on Monday by statewide environmentalist groups and regular Albuquerque citizens. Comments leaned decidedly in opposition to the proposed diversion project, especially after a rally organized by the environmentalist organizations outside the State Bar of New Mexico building, where the session was held.

The open house Monday was the first of eight, the rest scattered around Gila-adjacent communities in southern Arizona and New Mexico. Rather than public scoping meetings of the past — where the government agency would give a presentation, then members of the public would step to a microphone and vocally comment — the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission, through their contractor EMPSI, opted for an open house. Therein, members of the public could ask questions of Reclamation and ISC staff regarding information on posters set up around the room.

That system is similar to the one the Gila National Forest is using for its ongoing forest plan revision process. But, it was criticized by some Albuquerque-based opponents to the diversion project as being less conducive to public education.

“The open-house format is designed to keep the people from learning,” said Camilla Feibelman, of the Rio Grande chapter of the Sierra Club, at a rally outside. “I studied urban planning. I know. And it drives

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me crazy." Later, inside, "It doesn't allow you to ask your questions publicly. It doesn't allow you to hear the comments of others."

This is the format planned for each of the upcoming scoping sessions as well. Reclamation engineering chief Jeff Riley told the Daily Press that the format of the meetings was up to EMPSI, but that any format has its pros and cons.

"I think some people wanted the presentation component," he said. "And that's reasonable. But different people are going to thrive in that public, audience setting and some people are going to be nervous and would prefer this."

Members of the CAP Entity — the group charged with design, construction, operation and management of the diversion project — didn't want Monday's meeting in Albuquerque to take place at all. They fought hard against the scheduling of a scoping meeting in Albuquerque, during their meeting on June 11, calling it "pandering" to people from outside the southwest region of the state who have sided with the opposition to the project. Reclamation's Jeff Riley told them there is a great deal of interest in the project in Albuquerque and that the NEPA scoping process allows for opposition. It is one of the points to it. ISC attorney Dominique Work told the CAP Entity board that it was the "prerogative" of the joint lead agencies to choose where meetings were held.

Riley told the Daily Press he hadn't expected the CAP Entity board members' negative reaction to the Albuquerque meeting.

"Reclamation was surprised by the reaction," he said. "Albuquerque had been discussed in all of our EIS (environmental impact statement) meetings for a long time. It was out there for months. They shouldn't have been surprised. There is a large population center here and a lot of interest. It seemed natural to me." But, "That being said, would we have had one here if we knew ahead of time they didn't want it? Maybe not."

Feibelman said she was hurt by the question of what stake folks in Albuquerque had in the Gila River.

"We're all New Mexicans," she told the Daily Press. "Asking why an Albuquerquean cares about the rest of New Mexico is like asking why anyone cares about anything. We're all part of this state and ecosystem. The Gila River and surrounding environs belong to all Americans, not just to a few special interests who want to get their hands on some of the Gila's dwindling water supply."

No members of the CAP Entity board attended Monday's open house, but Executive Director Anthony Gutierrez was on hand to answer any questions the crowd had.

That crowd in Albuquerque was not supportive of the diversion project, especially with what they perceived as a lack of detail in the plan presented at the open house. Barb Stout, who said her sister lives in Silver City, said she was left with mainly questions.

"Who's going to pay for it?" she asked. "Is it the water users? Is it the taxpayers?"

"It's really frustrating to have this project going on when there isn't even a clear proposal," Feibelman said.

Members of the public weren't the only people who wished there had been more detail.

"It would have been nice if there was a little more information," Riley said. "But we're moving forward."

"You know, it's always changing," said EMPSI's Julie Remp, between demonstrating a Google Map of the proposed project, which will eventually be public. "They still aren't quite decided on some things."

To the crowd of more than 50 gathered outside the State Bar building Monday, former ISC director, hydrological engineer and vocal New Mexico Unit opponent Norm Gaume also criticized the lack of a full plan.

"The reason we're here today is they ran out of time and had to go with the latest thing they had," Gaume

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said. “And what they had is so new that they don’t even have a preliminary report on it that’s public. What we need is what the law provides, which is a hard look – a hard, scientifically based look. It is incredible that we would be here and still needing this, after the government has spent 10 years and \$15 million and never bothered to answer these questions.”

That crowd was made up of members of several chapters of the Sierra Club, the Gila Conservation Coalition, Defenders of Wildlife and more environmentalist organizations. Also present were former Albuquerque town councilors and other, unaffiliated citizens of the state’s largest city.

“It doesn’t make any sense – economically, environmentally,” said Richard Stoops, who said he visits the Gila a few times a year. “I’m in support of the non-diversion projects, which have been well studied, but this continues to be a boondoggle.”

Those who attended Albuquerque’s open house aren’t the only folks who will get a say in the scoping period of the National Environmental Policy Act environmental impact statement. Reclamation and the ISC have a full few weeks. The schedule for the rest of the meetings is as follows:

- July 6, at Wild Horse Pass Hotel & Casino, 5040 Wild Horse Pass Blvd., Chandler, Ariz.;
- July 7, at Apache Gold Casino Resort, Convention Center, 777 Geronimo Springs Blvd., Cutter Industrial Park, San Carlos, Ariz.;
- July 9, at the Grant County Veterans Memorial Business and Conference Center, Multipurpose Room, 3031 U.S. 180 E., Silver City;
- July 10, at Cliff High School, Old Gymnasium, 622 N.M. 211, Cliff;
- July 11, at the Glenwood Community Center and Library, 14 Menges Lane, Glenwood;
- July 12, at the Virden Community Center, 110 Richmond Ave., Virden; and
- July 13, at the Graham County General Services Building, 921 Thatcher Blvd., Safford, Ariz.

Meetings will be held from 4 to 7 p.m., except for the meeting in San Carlos on Saturday, July 7, which will be held from 1 to 4 p.m.

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