

West Bankers worry about prospect of coal-filled trains

Coalition cites risks of coal-filled rail cars

BY CHAD CALDER

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The battle over the growth of the coal export industry deep in Plaquemines Parish has come to the front lawns and roadsides of the West Bank.

Small yard signs have been cropping up throughout the area, offering an emphatic rejection of the prospect of coal-filled rail cars rumbling through Gretna, Marrero and Algiers.

They're part of an environmental coalition's effort to halt expansion of the coal industry in Plaquemines Parish, which critics say would draw railcars full of coal from points north, bringing unacceptable environmental, health and public safety risks with them.

The Clean Gulf Commerce Coalition, which includes the Louisiana Environmental Action Network, Sierra Club, Gulf Restoration Network and Lower Mississippi Riverkeeper, held a workshop at the Gretna Community Center last week.

There, about two dozen residents talked about their fear that coal dust from uncovered trains 150 cars long will pollute the air, damaging their health and homes, and that more trains will mean more traffic snarls and a greater risk that ambulances and fire trucks won't be able to get where they need to go in an emergency.

Rosie Agee, who lives next to a double railroad track on Fourth Street in Harvey, said that while she has a nostalgic fondness for some aspects of the railroad, the trains shake her walls, occasionally knocking household items over, and trap her in traffic jams longer than are legally allowed.

"And with a coal train, it's just a hazard," she said. "When the kids are over, they play in the yard, and they'll be getting (exposed to) all these fumes and coal dust."

Devin Martin, an organizer for the Sierra Club's Beyond Coal Exports Campaign, said the negative impacts of coal on the region are not fully appreciated, and it's



Advocate photo by CHAD CALDER -- A sign outside the Gretna Community Center is one of many that have begun cropping up as a coalition of environmental groups begins raising awareness about an impending increase in trains carrying coal through the west bank

important to raise awareness among the communities on the West Bank about the effects of coal export activity downriver.

The key project that coalition and concerned Plaquemines Parish residents have been trying to stop is RAM Terminals' bid to build a coal export facility near Myrtle Grove.

The project has the support of the parish and has already gotten approval from the state Department of Environmental Quality and Department of Natural Resources. It now awaits its last major hurdle: a permit from the [U.S. Army Corps of Engineers](#).

The coalition has asked the Corps to gather more input from the public "so people on the West Bank and across the entire region have a voice and can be heard." At this point, though, that seems unlikely.

Corps spokesman Ricky Boyett said the Corps has already met with coal's opponents and that RAM's permit application to the Corps has to do only with the facility's impact on wetlands and the navigation channel. He couldn't estimate when a decision will be made, though, since the St. Louis-based company still has to submit its wetlands mitigation plan.

Time will tell whether concerns about rail traffic and coal dust in the West Bank will contribute any momentum in the broader fight against the Myrtle Grove facility.

One of the workshop's participants went to the [Gretna City Council](#) meeting the following night and was told there was very little local governments can do to prevent the RAM terminal from getting approval. However, the coalition's efforts have resurrected a discussion about a 2002 study that looked at moving the railroad out of Gretna, Terrytown and Algiers and off the Belle Chasse Highway.

That study, commissioned by the Regional Planning Commission, suggested a route that would head northwest from the existing line in Plaquemines Parish at Cedar Grove, pass to the west of the U.S. Naval Air Station in Belle Chasse before turning north and running along the eastern edge of the Harvey Canal.

Gretna Mayor Belinda Constant said at the council meeting that the city would continue to support any effort to move the tracks.

Deputy Director Jeffrey W. Roesel said the RPC recently met with state and federal transportation agencies and expects to begin an environmental study on moving the tracks this fall.

Martin, however, said concerned residents in West Jefferson and Algiers shouldn't view moving the tracks as a solution, because the coal trains will roll through their communities far sooner than 32 miles of rail will be relocated.

"Now that these terminals are on the brink of getting built, the RPC and Plaquemines Parish are pointing to this study that's been floating around for more than a decade as a way to say, 'Don't worry about anything, we're going to reroute the train,' " he said.

If the Corps grants its permit, RAM will need only local building permits, which it is expected to receive. This would leave [a lawsuit the coalition has filed](#) against the state over the DNR and DEQ permits as the only obstacle to the RAM terminal.

In the meantime, the coalition will continue to spread its message.

"We've got a clear choice down here," Martin said. "We can focus on coastal restoration and build clean communities, or we can turn South Louisiana into an industrial coal corridor. But we can't do both."

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