

Backpedal or misunderstanding?

Group says McKinley County broke promise to spearhead uranium task force

By Christina Tsosie

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GALLUP — Two years ago, a health impact assessment was completed with funding from the New Mexico Health Equity Partnership. The Looking Within: A Health Impact Assessment of Uranium Mining yielded qualitative information about the impacts of legacy mining waste and mining in local communities within McKinley County.

“What came out of the HIA was that there were extensive correlations between health impacts and longterm exposure to radioactive material,” said Talia Boyd, the Western New Mexico organizer with Conservation Voters New Mexico. “Various cancers, hypertension, birth defects and other health disparities

were found among community members living in areas surrounding these active and abandoned uranium mines.”

Conservation Voters New Mexico is a statewide nonprofit organization that engages like-minded New Mexicans who want to conserve and protect the surrounding air, land, water and the collective health of the community. The group has been gathering support among McKinley County residents who have had to deal with legacy uranium mining waste for decades. The health impact assessment clearly identified the need to establish a data-based health baseline within impacted communities. The assessment recommended that “further health studies be conducted on uranium mining with adequate funding support.”

See Uranium mining, Page 5

Uranium mining

Continued from Page 1

“To make the data-based health baseline happen, community members of Crownpoint, Churchrock, Manuelito and the Red Water Pond Road brought this need to their county commissioners,” said Communications Director Liliana Castillo, with the Conservation Voters New Mexico.

In November, impacted community leaders proposed a county ordinance, brought forth by McKinley County Commissioner Genevieve Jackson. The ordinance called for a three-year moratorium on uranium mining within the county. During the three-year halt, it was implied that impacted communities could use that time to share their experiences in an effort to create policy recommendations to address issues and to conduct further studies.

“After that November 2016 meeting, the county commission discussed the proposed ordinance at four meetings, during which dozens of community members attended in support, providing public comment, urging the McKinley County Board of Commissioners to enact the moratorium,” Castillo said.

The commission scheduled a meeting to discuss the proposed ordinance Jan. 10.

“However, at the last minute, the Jan. 10 meeting — a meeting during which the commission was to discuss the ordinance — was rescheduled to Jan. 3,” Castillo said.

At the Jan. 3 meeting, commissioner of public lands with the New Mexico State Land Office Aubrey Dunn stated that a ban on uranium mining — even a three-year moratorium — would affect the state. Dunn stated that the ban on mining lands surrounding trust land could end in the banning of mining on state trust lands.

The abrupt change of the meeting was made without adequate public notice, and community members in support of the three-year moratorium were absent from the conversation. As a result, a resolution that barely resembled the original ordinance was passed. This passed ordinance suggested that impacted community members take their issues up with federal and state agencies, thereby relieving the commission of any further responsibility.

In response, the community of Red Water Pond Road threatened to sue under the Open Meetings Act, which forced the commission to reconsider the resolution. As a result, a special meeting was held March 14.

“After hearing over two hours of public comment, the county commission stated that they wanted to develop a formal Blue Ribbon Task Force and hold public hearings to provide more space to understand how communities are being impacted,” Castillo said. “Despite these promising statements, the commission passed the same resolution that was passed on Jan. 3.”

A ‘misunderstanding’

In mid-May, the Board of Commissioners sent a letter to Conservation Voters of New Mexico, backpedaling on their promise to develop a Blue Ribbon Task Force.

In response to a letter of appreciation in which Conservation Voters had commended the commission’s commitment to forming the Blue Ribbon Task Force, the commission pulled back.

“We see that there has been a misunderstanding of what the county stated in the resolution at the March 14 meeting,” the letter from McKinley County Commissioner Carol Bowman-Muskett states.

Bowman-Muskett cited “budgetary constraints and lack of expertise in the area” as the reasons why the commission cannot spearhead the task force.

“Pursuant to the resolution, the county will not be forming the task force, but again will participate in a task force formed to seek the necessary funding from other agencies that are well suited in expertise and funding to ultimately analyze the data collected from public hearings,” the letter states.

Boyd said there hadn’t been a “misunderstanding.”

“At the end of the March 14 meeting, the commissioners promised the community that they were going to establish a Blue Ribbon Task Force to start a dialogue on these communities impacted by uranium mining,” Boyd said. “It was stated in a room full of people that the commission would spearhead this task force and they promised to work with us. Through the community, we are trying to pressure the commissioners to honor their promise.

“For decades, the mining industry has been the economic driver for this area and during all this time, our local government hasn’t really ever stood up for the people,” Boyd said. “Even when the Church Rock Tailings Spill occurred in 1979 — which is still the largest spill in U.S. history — nothing was done for the locals. It is infuriating for the community members.”