

Nuclear debate on Clark Public Utilities agenda

Economist's study finds power plant is a waste of money

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Public meeting

The Clark Public Utilities Board of Commissioners will receive a presentation of a study by utility economist Robert McCullough at 9 a.m. today at the Vancouver Service Center, 1200 Fort Vancouver Way.

A debate over the cost and safety of running the Pacific Northwest's only nuclear power plant has landed on the agenda of the Clark Public Utilities Board of Commissioners, with a 212-page study by a renowned energy expert serving as the focal point.



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The board, during its public hearing today, will receive a presentation of the study by Robert McCullough, a Portland-based utility economist whose bona fides include revealing Enron Corp.'s shady manipulations of electricity markets.

The study's upshot: the Columbia Generating Station, located on the Hanford Nuclear Reservation in southeastern Washington, is a waste of money and should be mothballed. It's a conclusion that's drawn criticism from Energy Northwest, the

Richland-based consortium of public power agencies that runs the Columbia nuclear plant. Part of the consortium's problem with McCullough's study is its skepticism about the group that commissioned it: Physicians for Social Responsibility, or PSR, a group critical of nuclear power for safety and health reasons.

The study showed up on Clark Public Utilities' radar because the utility purchases about 57 percent of its power from the Bonneville Power Administration, which pays the costs of maintaining and operating the Columbia plant. The utility's purchase of power from BPA includes about 6 percent of the output of the Columbia facility. The utility also has a representative on Energy Northwest's 27-member board of directors.

At the request of PSR, the utility agreed to listen to McCullough's presentation. Erica Erland, a utility spokeswoman, said she doesn't expect the utility's board to take any action today.

The Columbia facility, in operation since 1984, costs Northwest ratepayers on average as much as an extra \$50 per year, according to McCullough's study. The study concludes that the plant should be replaced with purchases of cheaper market alternatives, which McCullough estimates would save ratepayers \$1.7 billion over the next 17 years. The facility is "significantly" costlier than other nuclear plants, the study says, in part, because it's an older, stand-alone plant. Angela Walz, a spokeswoman for Energy Northwest, said two studies, including one it conducted jointly with BPA, both found that the Columbia plant "remains the best value when compared to all practical alternatives for Northwest ratepayers." Walz also questions the veracity of McCullough's report, saying it "includes comments throughout that support PSR initiatives."

In a letter introducing his study, McCullough says his mandate was narrow — to assess the economics of the Columbia facility. And his assessment, he says, was "unnecessarily complicated by a lack of transparency at Energy Northwest." Charles Johnson, of Oregon and Washington Physicians for Social Responsibility, said his group's primary concern is safety — a study it commissioned says the Columbia plant is seismically unsafe.

However, mindful of utilities' fiduciary responsibilities, Johnson said, the group also wanted an economic analysis of the facility. McCullough "was the guy who dug up the transcripts" on Enron, the former utility that engaged in numerous financial and price-fixing frauds, he said. "His reputation is really high."

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