San Antonio Express-News

Nuke waste can be safely transported

Express-News Editorial Board

Published 12:00 am, Saturday, March 18, 2017

There's been no shortage of local anxiety over a proposal to transport and store high-level nuclear waste in West Texas.

Bexar County Commissioners Court unanimously voted to oppose the transport of spent nuclear fuel to Andrews County, and City Councilman Ron Nirenberg has said he wants the city to legally oppose Waste Control Specialists' application.

The concern is that rail transport of high-level nuclear waste from across the U.S. to Andrews County will pass through Bexar County, putting our community at risk. But the facts don't fully support the concern.

Nuclear waste is transported safely all the time. And there needs to be a solution to either the interim or long-term storage of spent nuclear fuel at more than 62 sites across the nation. This includes 29 years of high-level waste stored at the South Texas Project.

Waste Control Specialists hopes to begin accepting high-level nuclear waste by 2021. Its application with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has been deemed complete, but extensive review and deliberation remains.

Because the U.S. has failed for decades to develop a permanent storage site for high-level nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain in Nevada, roughly 70,000 metric tons of it is being stored at power plants across the country. This includes "stranded" fuel at shuttered plants. It's an immense public safety issue to have so much high-level waste at so many sites.

Waste Control Specialists, which receives low-level nuclear waste from hospitals and other sources, has applied to store up to 40,000 metric tons of this waste for 40 to 100 years. It would be an interim location until permanent storage sites could be developed.

One concern is transport. Two longtime and respected advocates for the environment, Tom “Smitty” Smith, formerly of Public Citizen, and wife Karen Hadden of the SEED Coalition have raised fears about a rail accident or terrorist attack in San Antonio.

But the reality is that the nuclear waste transport casks are virtually indestructible. These metal casks, often weighing about 100 tons, have remained impervious despite extreme tests. They’ve been smashed by trains, crashed into walls at high speeds, burned with jet fuel and dropped from the sky — and stayed intact.

In 2006, the National Academy of Sciences reported it “could identify no fundamental technical barriers to the safe transport of spent fuel and high-level radioactive waste in the United States.”

Over the last 40 years, there have been thousands of shipments of spent nuclear fuel in the U.S. without any radiological release or environmental harm, according to the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

Back in 2012, under President Barack Obama, the Blue Ribbon Commission on America’s Nuclear Future recommended establishing interim storage sites for spent nuclear fuel. Such sites could safely store “stranded fuel” presently kept at shutdown plants. They would give the nation much-needed flexibility as other nuclear plants shut down, and, of course, the gift of time to develop permanent storage sites.

“The nation’s failure to come to grips with the nuclear waste has already proved damaging and costly and it will be more damaging and more costly the longer it continues,” the report warns.

If not Andrews County, then where?

Andrews County, on the Texas-New Mexico border, is sparsely populated, arid, and has few watersheds and deep groundwater. It’s not a part of the country likely to be hit by natural disaster. Andrews County officials want the nuclear waste, which will bring revenue to the county and the state of Texas.

Not addressing the interim and long-term storage needs for spent nuclear fuel only provides a false sense of security. The spent fuel will keep collecting at sites across the

country. The cost of storage to ratepayers and taxpayers will only increase. And the U.S. will fall behind on the global challenge of nuclear safety, security and storage. Perhaps there is a debate to be had on building new nuclear plants, but the fact is, we have them and they have produced waste that must be stored. Let’s deal with that.