

BIRMINGHAM NEWS - Oct. 23

Norfolk Southern rules out Bibb County site for rail hub

Norfolk Southern says it moving forward with its plans for a \$112 million railroad hub in McCalla after evaluating another location advanced by McCalla opponents of the project.

"We have performed a comprehensive analysis of the Bibb County site, but the McCalla site remains our preferred option," Norfolk Southern spokesman Rudy Husband said Thursday.

An explanation of why the McCalla site is superior will be given at a public meeting at the Bessemer Civic Center on Nov. 12, when the Alabama Department of Transportation is hosting a "public involvement" gathering on behalf of Norfolk Southern.

As at a similar public meeting in August, experts on different aspects of the hub project will be at stations throughout the civic center to answer questions from the public.

Still, the elimination of the Bibb County site from contention will likely not sit well with opponents, who formed No Hub 4 McCalla to challenge the project. Members showed up at the August meeting wearing surgical masks and bright yellow shirts that read "No Hub."

"While we understand that not everyone who attends the public information session will leave satisfied with our information, we are going to do everything we can to make sure that people who have specific questions get with the appropriate subject matter experts who can respond to those questions," Husband said.

Husband said the November meeting will provide answers to new issues raised in August. He said information will be available about other sites the company considered, including the Bibb County site.

Terry Finch, a founder of the No Hub group and the person who proposed the Bibb County site, said he never really expected the company to change its plans.

"I knew they were going to have all of the reasons why the other site wouldn't work," Finch said Thursday. "They want that McCalla site. They're set on that."

Finch said railroad officials told him the contour of the land, its elevation above the railroad tracks and required improvements make the Bibb County site cost-prohibitive. He said Norfolk Southern told him the site was nearly 10 miles too distant from its customer base.

In addition to sponsoring the public meeting, ALDOT also pushed Norfolk Southern to establish a community outreach group that would introduce local involvement in the project.

Ashley Cousins of AC ESS LLC is leading the formation of the outreach group. She mailed letters this week to more than 200 people who submitted comments at the last public meeting, as well to as others.

Cousins said the outreach group is taking nominations until Nov. 20, and then a selection panel will pick the group's members. Norfolk Southern will not have any representation on the nominating committee or the group itself, Husband said.

Applications and information can be obtained by calling 205-933-0600 or by e-mail at nomination@acessllc.com.

Finch said Norfolk Southern plans to use the group to throw money at community projects in a bid to win local support. He said No Hub has not decided if it will have any representation in the new group.

"They're trying to solicit and pay for people's positive opinions," Finch said.

Finch said when Norfolk Southern visited the Bibb County site, residents there were upset at him for leading them there. "I actually had two threatening phone calls when they saw me out at Bibb."

Finch said No Hub is planning another No Hub meeting at McAdory Elementary School before the next public meeting, though a date and time have not been set.